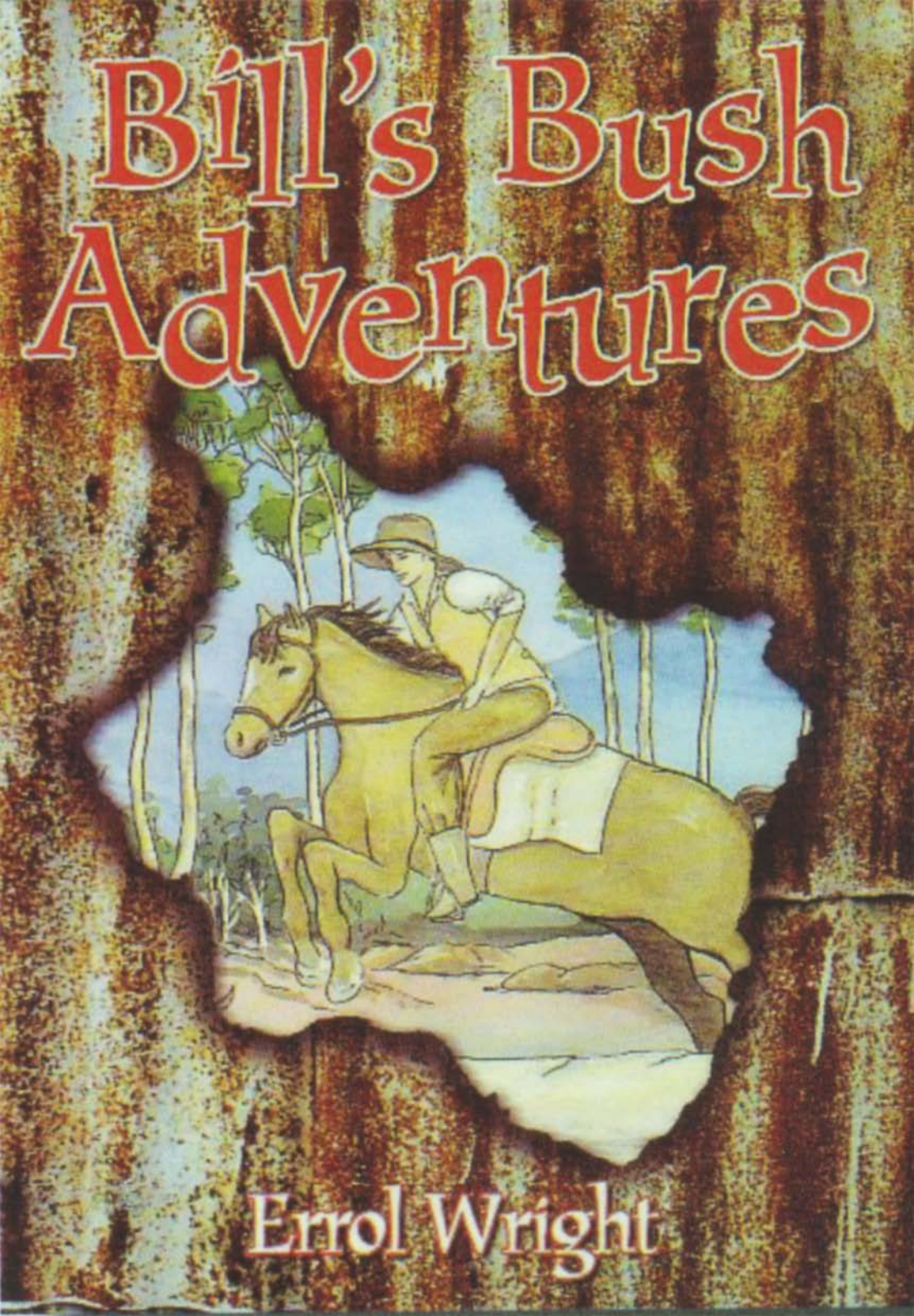
Bill's Bush Adventures



Errol Wright

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by Lionel Hartley, January 2026

Bill's Bush Adventures

ERROL WRIGHT

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my mother, Gwendolon Allice, who did her best to steer "Bill" through his childhood.

Acknowledgements

A sincere thank you must be expressed to all who contributed to publishing this book.

Kathy Louwan, a busy mother and schoolteacher, took time out to do the initial editing of the stories.

Linda Bryan, the author's daughter and another busy mother and teacher, devoted many hours to illustrating the stories. Without her artistic skills, the book would not have been possible.

The stories would not have been written had it not been for the encouragement of the Geraldton church members who listened to a "Bill" story prior to the weekly sermon.

Thank you to all who made it happen.

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Introduction

The stories in this book are true events that occurred between 1942 and 1949. The names of the animals have not been changed, nor has the identity of Bill been hidden.

The stories have been collected as a result of pressure from friends and family, who listened in on the children's story time in church each week.

So, by request, these experiences have been recorded for grandparents to read to their grandchildren, parents to read as bedtime stories or for children who like to read.

These experiences from Bill's boyhood taught him many lessons that helped him in later life. It is hoped young people who share in Bill's adventures will also absorb the object lessons portrayed.

From 1942 to 1944, Bill lived with his parents on a 160-hectare (400-acre) property halfway between Forster and Taree on the north coast of New South Wales, Australia. Bill's father had a charcoal business that helped keep trucks and buses on the road when petrol was in short supply. Dead trees were cut down and split into sections, then carried on sleds pulled by draft horses to pits dug in the ground. When the pits were full they were covered and fired at the end of each day. In the mornings, the pits were uncovered and the charcoal shovelled into bags to be sent by truck and train to destinations up and down the coast.

These were hard times for many families who struggled to make ends meet. Bill and his parents lived in an old slab cottage with no running water, no electricity, a backyard toilet and a meagre water supply. Today, people find it hard

to imagine what life was like back in the '40s. The days of coppers, wood stoves, open fires, weekly baths, kerosene lamps and Chinese lanterns are long gone.

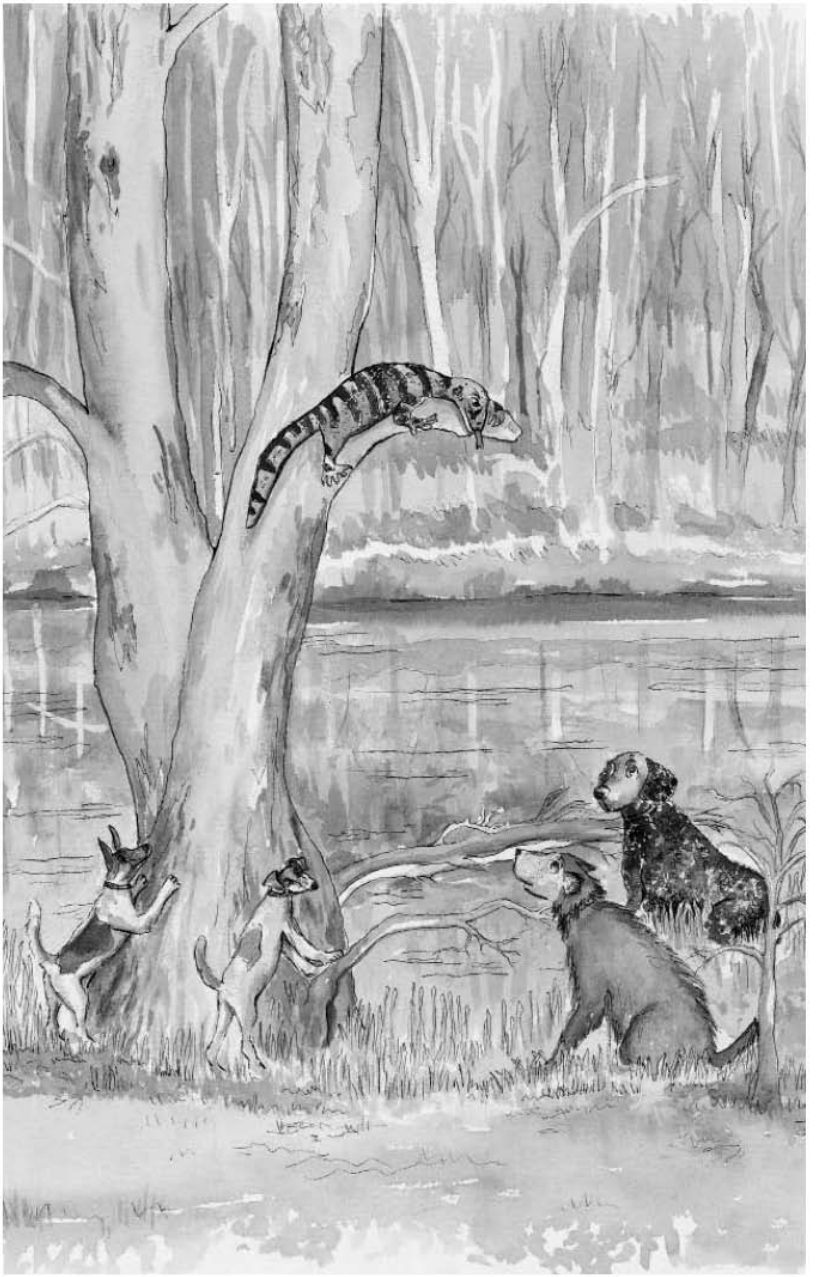
To help provide reasonable meals, there were hens for eggs and the occasional chicken meal, and cows for milk, butter and cream. Then there was the vegetable garden, the orchard with its wide variety of delicious fruit and the seasonal mushrooms the family enjoyed collecting. The dogs were fed by shooting rabbits and the occasional kangaroo. General items were purchased by Bill's mum, when she went on the bus every Wednesday to shop in Taree.

These were the days when country families spent their evenings listening to a crackly radio wired to a car battery. The highlight was the seven o'clock news, which reported on the war overseas and events happening at home.

This is the background to *Bill's Bush Adventures*. Life was hard but uncomplicated. A quiet walk in the bush would inevitably turn into an adventure as the dogs flushed a variety of wildlife from the bush. Today, children enjoy different kinds of adventures and this makes Bill's stories unique—a little window into the past.

From 1945 to 1949, Bill and his parents lived in Forster, where his father worked as a builder. Most of Bill's horse-riding adventures happened during this period, before he left home at the age of 16 to face the world.

As some of the words used in these stories may come from a different time and place than that of the reading, there is a list of words at the back of the book. Words included in this are marked with an asterisk (*) the first time they appear in the stories.



ANNA THE GOANNA

Bill loved to go exploring in the bush* with his four dogs. There was Bruce, the big, black, curly-haired retriever, who had just wandered into Bill's yard—and stayed. Bill's favourite was Trixy, the cattle dog. Then there was Tess, the fox terrier who had delivered two pups—a black-and-white female and a tan-and-white male. They were called Punch and Judy. Sadly, Punch died from a grass tick, so Bruce had three females to protect. Maybe that is why he never wandered off.

Behind the house, deep in the bush, there was a swamp surrounded by huge gum trees. This was an exciting place, full of wildlife. It was a place where wallabies came to graze and wombats padded about. There were lots of noisy birds, croaking frogs, lazy lizards, slippery snakes and Anna the Goanna, who had claimed the area as her territory.

Every time Bill visited the swamp, the dogs would flush out Anna the Goanna. She would run up a gum tree, poking out her tongue at them as they barked and jumped up and down at the base of the tree.

One hot, sunny Sunday, Bill headed off with the dogs to visit the swamp. The dogs were in a playful mood, so Bill let them race ahead of him. Then he hid behind a big ironbark tree. When the dogs realised Bill wasn't behind them, they rushed back, past the old ironbark tree and down the track—until they realised they had been tricked. Now it was time to use their noses. They followed the scent until they sniffed out Bill's hiding place. When Bill gave a loud shout, they all jumped and danced about, wagging their tails, barking and trying to lick him with their long, slobbery tongues.

No sooner had they arrived at the swamp than the dogs discovered Anna the Goanna, who quickly headed for the nearest big tree. Bruce led the hunters as they threaded their way through the bracken fern, shrubs and saplings. He was in full flight when, suddenly, Anna skidded to a stop and turned to face her attackers. Bruce was caught by surprise. It was too late to change direction. With a yelp of shock, he collided with the giant goanna, who bit him on the side of his head. Before she could bite him a second time, the three females attacked with all the ferocity of angry dogs protecting their mate.

Bill couldn't believe all the noise. The ferocious racket was quite frightening and could be heard for a long distance. It was all too much for Anna. She made a grab for Trixy but missed. Then, with a wild swing of her giant tail, she rushed for a big grey gum tree and was soon out of reach. Tess, the fox terrier, managed to bite Anna's tail but made little impression. Once safely on a sturdy branch, Anna glared down at the dogs, hissing and poking out her tongue.

Poor old Bruce was in a bad way. His face was swollen and bleeding. He could only see out of one eye as he looked sadly at Bill, pleading for something to be done.

The situation was dangerous. Goannas have poisonous

teeth due to their bad eating habits. They never clean their teeth, which are sharp and vicious. They eat dead and rotting animals, venomous snakes, birds, centipedes and anything else they fancy.

Bill knew they had to get home, so he and the four dogs hurried back along the track as fast as they could. As soon as they reached the cottage, Bill explained Bruce's shocking wounds to his mum, who quickly poured antiseptic medicine on the dog's head. It was some time before Bruce could eat properly and even longer before he was feeling normal again.

From that time on, the dogs kept well away from Anna the Goanna, leaving her to enjoy being in charge of the swamp. Bruce learned a valuable lesson that day—and so did Bill.

THE BIG DRAFT HORSE

Bill wanted a horse. He wanted one real bad. Every time a neighbour came to visit, Bill would pester the poor man to let him have a ride. But the answer was always the same: "I'm sorry Bill—you need to learn to ride before you can ride this horse."

Bill felt the situation was unfair. He lived on 160 hectares (400 acres)—80 of them cleared, with a dam and lots of grass. They had 15 cows, numerous ducks and hundreds of chooks that Bill had to feed every day, as well as two draft horses. But there was no horse he could ride.

The draft horses worked hard all day, pulling sleds loaded high with lengths of timber. These were tipped into pits, where they were turned into charcoal overnight. Bill had to feed the horses every evening while his dad milked the cows. Bill loved the huge animals, which were so gentle and easy to manage. His love for horses began with this friendship with the two draft horses.

As the weeks went by, Bill kept pestering his dad for a

riding horse—until his dad came up with a solution.

"Why don't you try riding Star?" suggested his dad. "He's not as big as Champ and he has a soft mouth, so you could easily turn and stop him."

"Has he ever been ridden?" Bill asked. His dad didn't know.

"How will I get up and down?" Bill wanted to know.

"That's for you to work out," Bill's dad replied.

So that was it: a horse to ride after work, too tall to climb onto, with no saddle and two pieces of rope with which to steer him. Star had a backbone like the top rail of the cattle-yard fence, and after a hard day's work, he was all hot and sweaty. What a prospect!

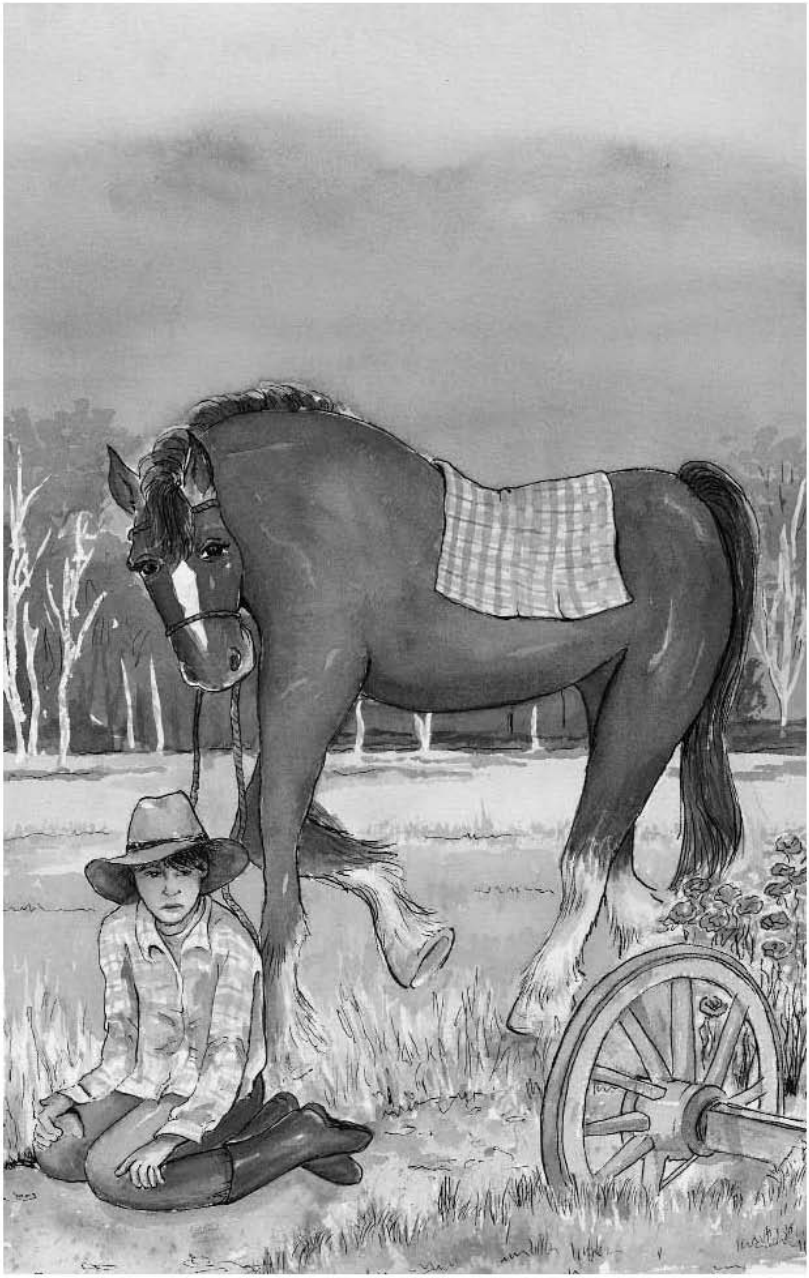
"Guess it's worth a try," Bill decided. "But I hope no-one sees me jogging around on a dumb old draft horse."

Bill spent the next few days thinking about it. Then early one Sunday morning, when everyone—including the horses—had a day to laze about, Bill decided to give it a go. Bill's mum warned him to take it easy for the first few times, as it wouldn't be a comfortable ride. Maybe only an hour to start with. Bill's dad said nothing, hoping a good lesson might cure him.

Bill banged the feed tin with a stick, the signal for the horses to come for some special feed mix. They both came trotting up the paddock without a thought as to why they were being fed so early in the morning.

Bill gave them a small handful of feed then, with much tiptoeing, managed to get the bridle on Star. He led the unsuspecting horse alongside an old tree stump, threw a wheat bag over his back and jumped on.

Star just stood there, so Bill nudged him in the ribs, made the usual "click click" sounds and away they went. All went well as they followed the creek that meandered its way across the paddock. Star had a funny habit of trotting when going



down a slope. The first time Star did this, Bill slid up onto his neck, lost his balance and fell off. Star just stood there, looking down at him as he sat on the grass and checked his bruises.

Fortunately there was another stump nearby, so Bill repeated the original performance and off they went. All morning they explored the bush tracks and wandered up and down the paddock. By lunchtime, Bill was feeling uncomfortable and decided he had had enough for his first day. As soon as he slid to the ground, he thought he would never walk again. Oh, the pain!

Bill sat on a very soft cushion for the next couple of days. He walked kind of funny too, as though he couldn't straighten his legs. His mum didn't say, "I told you so!" but Bill still learned a valuable lesson from his painful introduction to horse riding. He decided not to overdo things—even things that are fun. He was also reminded to take notice of Mum's advice.

After a few weeks of trial and error, falling off and getting on again, Bill began to quite enjoy his rides on Star. The dogs enjoyed the outings too, so it became a regular event. Bill found that a cushion under the bag made his rides more comfortable and in no time, he was learning how to stay on when Star trotted downhill. He rode him when he went for the cows, to collect the mail and for long rides along bush tracks.

One day, Bill met a neighbour out looking for a stray cow and agreed to help find the wandering beast. After awhile, the neighbour commented, "I am surprised to see how well you handle that big horse, Bill. That's a great way to learn how to ride. You will be able to ride anything after learning bareback on such a big horse."

And so Bill discovered when his chance came.

THE SCREEN DOOR

The old slab-timber cottage that Bill and his parents lived in was not far from the bush where lots of creatures lived. There were all kinds of creepy-crawlies that liked to visit the orchard and the garden surrounding the house.

To keep unwanted visitors from entering the house, Bill's mum had a screen door installed at the back door. The timber door opened inward, while the screen door opened outward. Bill was always getting in trouble for failing to close the door securely. His mum would scold him for being in such a hurry and remind him of the purpose of the screen door.

One day, Bill's mum was visiting a neighbour, leaving Bill to do his schoolwork and look after the house. When it came time for Bill to feed the chooks* and collect the eggs, he rushed off, leaving the screen door half open.

When his mum came home, she found the screen door wide open, with the wind banging it against the wall of the house. When Bill came in with the eggs, he received a lengthy talking-to and a strong warning of possible punishments he

would receive if he failed to mend his ways.

That night, when the family were sitting around the table enjoying their evening meal, Bill caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. Something had moved from behind the kerosene fridge, to the protection of the food cupboard. Suddenly, there was a crash as the biscuit tin fell off a shelf and rolled across the floor.

"That's strange," said Bill's mum. "I wonder what caused that."

Then Bill noticed the curtain covering the cupboard shelves move near the floor and up near the middle shelf.

"It looks like we have a visitor," Bill said in a shaky voice.

Bill's dad decided to investigate. As he pulled the curtain aside, they saw a large snake trying to work its way to the top shelf, where the eggs were kept.

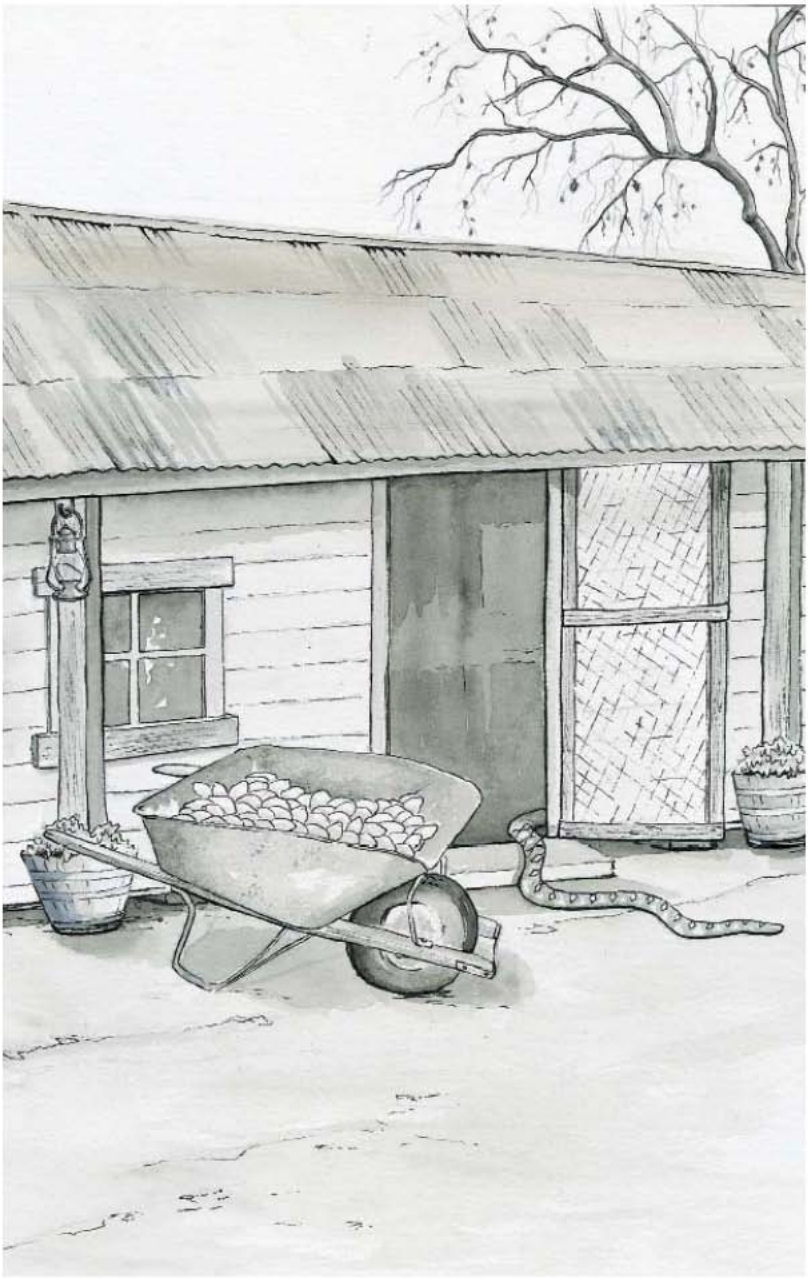
Suddenly there was panic. Bill's mum climbed onto her chair while Bill fled outside to find protection among the dogs. Bill's dad said not to panic, as it was only a carpet snake.* Bill's mum was not comforted.

"It's OK," said Bill's dad, as he took hold of the fat reptile and dragged it outside, where it could find its way back to where it came from.

Bill realised he had only seen its tail disappearing into the food cupboard and wondered what his Mum would have done had she trodden on the snake in the semi-dark kitchen. The kerosene lamps only shed a small amount of light.

As soon as Bill's mum calmed down, she pointed out that the snake had invaded her kitchen because Bill had left the screen door open when he went to feed the chooks. Bill knew he was in trouble. He had been warned many times about the dangers of leaving the screen door unlatched.

Bill's dad added to Bill's plight when he commented, "We



are fortunate that it wasn't a red-bellied black snake. He would have been a much more difficult creature to evict. Something must be done to help Bill remember to close that screen door."

It was decided that every time he left the screen door open, Bill would spend an extra half hour chopping firewood. It worked—and Bill grew up mindful of the need to close screen doors.

THE PIG AND THE PEACH

Bill's dad decided to buy some pigs to use their excess milk. One troublesome pig was named Willy Wig the Pig. She was always getting into mischief. She would break out of her pen and raid the chook feed set out in the yards, or push her way into the feed shed, spilling wheat everywhere.

Willy Wig learned to invade the vegetable garden, chomping away on anything that caught her fancy. She would bulldoze her way under the wire fence protecting the orchard and roam under the fruit trees, vacuuming up any ripe or rotten fruit that had fallen to the ground.

In that orchard was a special peach tree that produced the most succulent slipstone peaches Bill had ever eaten. When the fruit was ready, Bill, and his mum and dad, would choose one each, then sit on the front verandah to relax and enjoy their special treat. Finally, when there were only three big, rosy-red peaches left on the tree, it was decided to tie a length of

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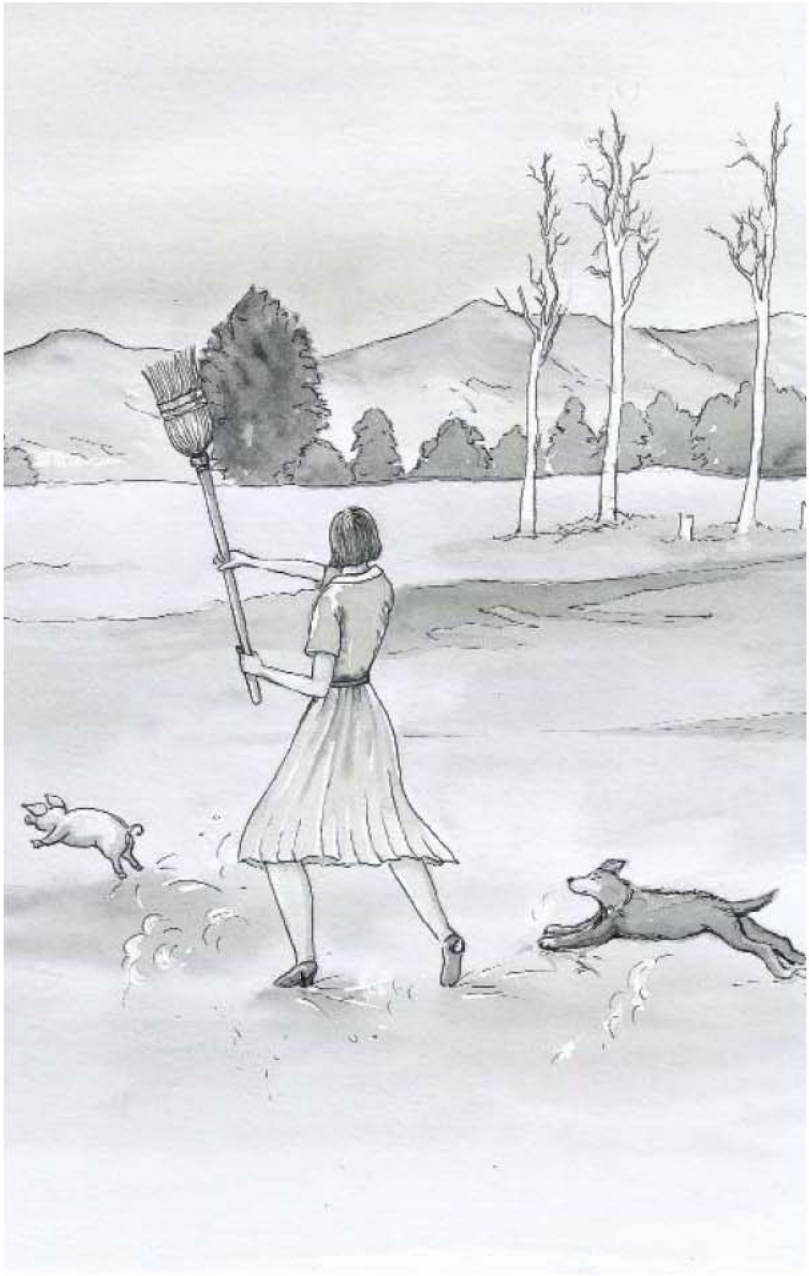


Bill hurried across to rescue the pig, driving her back uphill and into her pen.

"What's wrong?" he asked his red-faced, exasperated looking mum.

"That wretched pig ate my peach!" she yelled.

"How could she have reached that high?" asked Bill.

"The pig bumped the tree trunk until the peach fell to the ground, then the greedy brute gobbled it up before you could say 'Jack Rabbit'," his mum spluttered.

"Oh! I am so sorry. You were really looking forward to enjoying that peach. Maybe there is a lesson in this for all of us," replied Bill slyly. "Half a peach would have been better than no peach."

As that thought sank in, they both burst out laughing at the tragic ending to the peach drama that was supposed to end quite differently.

TUNG-OIL NUTS

One day, Bill suggested inviting some of his mates* for a camping trip during the coming long weekend. His dad agreed and the invitations were sent out. They then went exploring to find a suitable camping spot deep in the bush.

A week before the planned camping trip, Bill and his dad found the perfect place, near a creek with a deep swimming hole. Nearby was a small clearing, surrounded by small but strong trees they could use to attach a large tarpaulin for shelter. It would be fun sleeping out—but no-one wanted a possum to fall on their head during the night.

The creek would provide water for drinking and cooking. And the swimming hole would be great for washing, as well as a fun place during the hot part of the day. All was set for the weekend campout.

Four boys accepted the invitation to experience the great outdoors for the long weekend. Bill met them at the bus stop and excitedly told them all the things he had planned.

As soon as they changed into camping clothes and sorted

out their gear, the boys headed off into the bush, escorted by Bill's father and the excited dogs.

Everything went according to plan and all enjoyed the outdoor experience. The nights were cool but the days were bright and sunny. The boys all had a good time living, eating and sleeping among nature. The days went all too quickly and it was soon time to head back to the bus stop on the top of the hill.

Before they set off, Bill's dad warned the boys not to go near the orchard inside the fence near the bus stop.

"The fruit in there is not safe to eat. Those are tung-oil nuts, used for making varnish," he explained.

Bill knew the strange fruit was poisonous, so he explained all about them as he walked with his mates up the track to the bus stop.

"They are a strange fruit," he pointed out. "They look like apples, they peel like an orange and inside there are four nuts that smell oily and look like Brazil nuts."

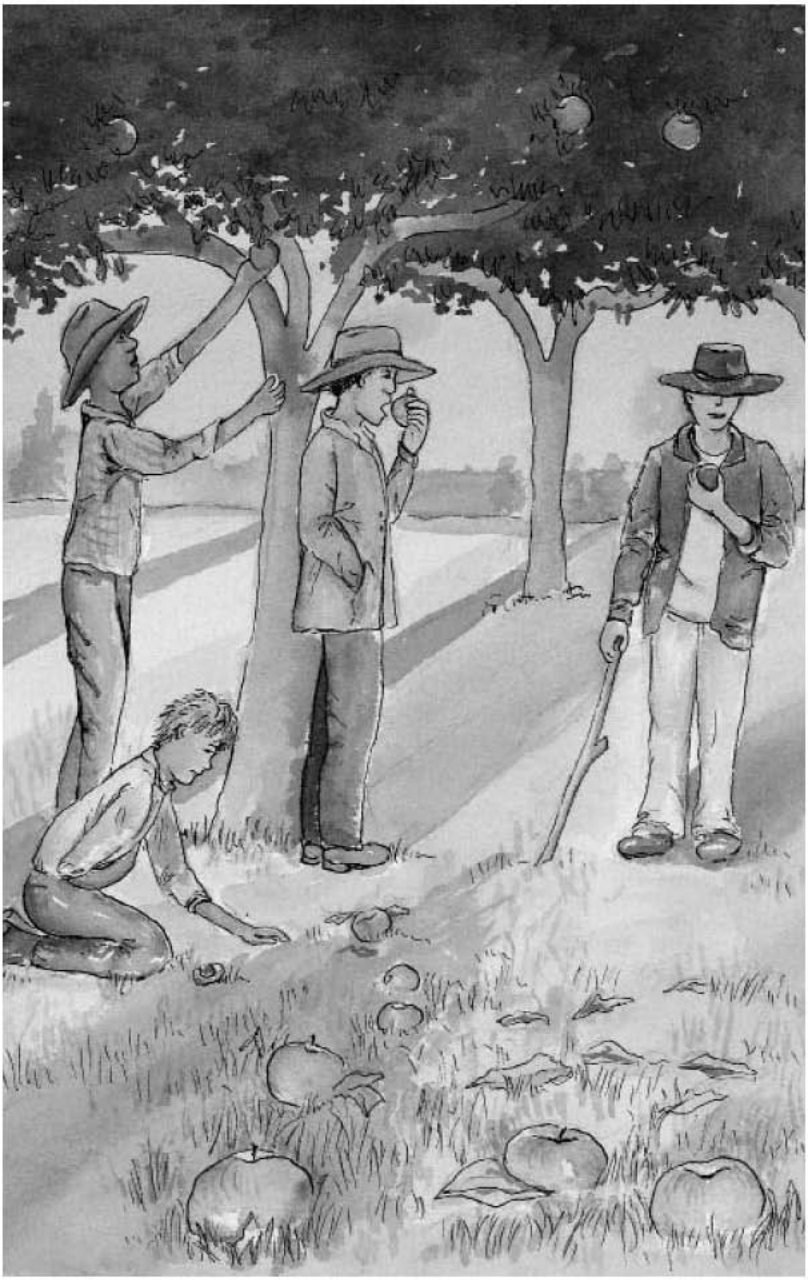
Bill stayed, chatting with the boys for quite a while but the bus was late and it was time to feed his hens. He said farewell and ran home to get his chores done before dark.

The boys waited and waited but there was no sign of the bus. They began to get bored and hunger pangs were troubling them. One boy suggested they have a look at the strange fruit they could see through the fence, a little way down the road.

"Why don't we pick some and see what they look like?" suggested one boy.

"Why not?" responded another.

They discovered they were just as Bill had explained—soft, reddish in colour and easy to peel. One boy suggested maybe Bill's dad had warned them against eating them because he



wanted to sell them and wasn't willing to share them with the group.

"Why not try one?" suggested one boy. "They look harmless enough."

"Yes," said another boy, "just one nut each."

So they chewed away on the strong tasting nuts, which were different from anything they have ever tasted before. They were oily and dried their mouths out—but not all that bad.

They were just about to peel another fruit when they heard the old bus grinding its way up the hill, so they had to run back to the bus stop.

As the bus swayed and lurched around the bends, the boys began to feel uncomfortable. They were not enjoying the trip at all. In fact, they began to feel sick. Soon there were four heads leaning out the windows, making very unpleasant noises. The other passengers were disturbed by their performance. The bus driver, who was watching them in his rear-view mirror, was so concerned he stopped the bus. He got out of his seat and went back to talk with the boys.

He got a shock when he saw their pale, green faces and their dull looking eyes.

"What have you been eating?" he asked.

Between moans and groans, they confessed. "We ate some tung-oil nuts in Mr Wright's orchard," they said. The driver knew about the orchard of strange fruit—and he knew the fruit was not safe to eat.

The driver warned the passengers to hold on tight, as they were in for a bus ride to end all bus rides, and away they went. The farms shot by as the old bus sped over the rough gravel road at breakneck speed.

They hardly noticed some of the hills as they bumped their way along, up and down, round and round, swerving and

sliding as the minutes raced by.

Soon it was not just the four boys who were sick. But the bus driver refused to slacken his pace.

Over the Manning River bridge they raced, straight up the hill to the hospital with the horn blaring. The emergency staff ran out to see what the fuss was about. As the bus driver explained the problem, the orderlies rushed the semiconscious boys into a special room, where they used a stomach pump to remove what was left of the tung-oil nuts from their stomachs.

The next day, the boys went home from the hospital looking rather worse for wear. Their experience was one they would never forget. All had learned a valuable lesson and would remember to take notice of warnings and advice—it can save a lot of hardship.

BUSHFIRE

For some unknown reason, the valley where Bill and his parents lived attracted the noisiest and most frightening thunderstorms. As soon as the banging and flashing started, Bill would dive under his bed, accompanied by Toss and Judy, the two small dogs. Big Bruce and Trixy would hide under the house.

The hens would hide in their sheds, the birds would disappear and everything would go quiet as the storm began to rage.

One day, a savage storm struck the farm. The lightning flashed and the thunder roared in the most terrifying way. Bill and the two small dogs hid under the bed, with the quilt pulled down to the floor. Bill lay still in the dark room, with his ears covered and eyes tightly closed.

It was a really wild storm, which was causing a lot of damage. At the height of the storm, lightning struck a big, old, dead tree on the hill near the cow stalls. Big chunks of wood were thrown in all directions and a fire burst out in what was

left of the trunk. The fire blazed like a gigantic torch.

Bill's mum called him out from under his bed to see the unusual sight. As they watched the burning tree, there was another flash, followed soon after by a loud, crashing rumble of thunder that shook the house. Bill dived under the kitchen table and even his mum looked startled as the shock waves reverberated up and down the valley.

Bill and his mum were unaware that the vicious flash of lightning had struck another big, old, dead tree. It was in the centre of the bush, which stretched for miles on the other side of the road that bordered the property.

As soon as the storm had passed, the sun came out and quickly dried the countryside. Sparks and hot cinders fell from the burning tree, and the bush began to burn as the thick carpet of dead leaves and twigs caught fire.

Bill's parents watched the smoke and flames devouring the bush with worried faces. Although the fire was a long way from the house, it was building up to become a serious bushfire. A lot of wildlife had already begun moving across the cleared land in front of the house, looking for a place to hide from the heat and smoke.

As the bushfire raged out of control, the worst thing that could happen happened. A westerly wind arrived. It fanned the flames, turning a nasty fire into a raging fireball that raced along, devouring everything in its path. Worst of all, it was now heading in the direction of the house. Bill had never seen his parents look so worried.

"If this wind keeps up, the fire will jump the road and devour the dry grass, destroying our house with it," Bill's dad declared.

They stood on the verandah, wondering what to do. Bill's mum said, "There is only one way to save our house and our

lives, and that is to pray."

Bill and his dad agreed. There was nothing else they could do. Only God could stop this raging inferno. They knelt in the centre of the lounge room and prayed for God's miraculous intervention.

After their prayer, they returned to the verandah to see what would happen. The fire was right up to the edge of the road and ready to cross. Then the fire only had 100 metres (110 yards) to reach the house. They could see the bush exploding as everything in the fire's path was destroyed.

Then Bill's dad broke the silence. "Have you noticed something?" he asked.

"No," said Bill and his mum, "everything is still terrifying."

"Look again," insisted Bill's dad. "The smoke and flames are going straight up in the air. The wind has stopped."

"Yes, it has," replied Bill's mum.

The fire was still burning strongly but it was no longer being pushed along by the westerly wind. It burnt its way to the edge of the road but went no further.

There were three very relieved and grateful people on the verandah that day, as they watched the fire burning back on itself. It was a good lesson for Bill to learn—God does care and answers our prayers.

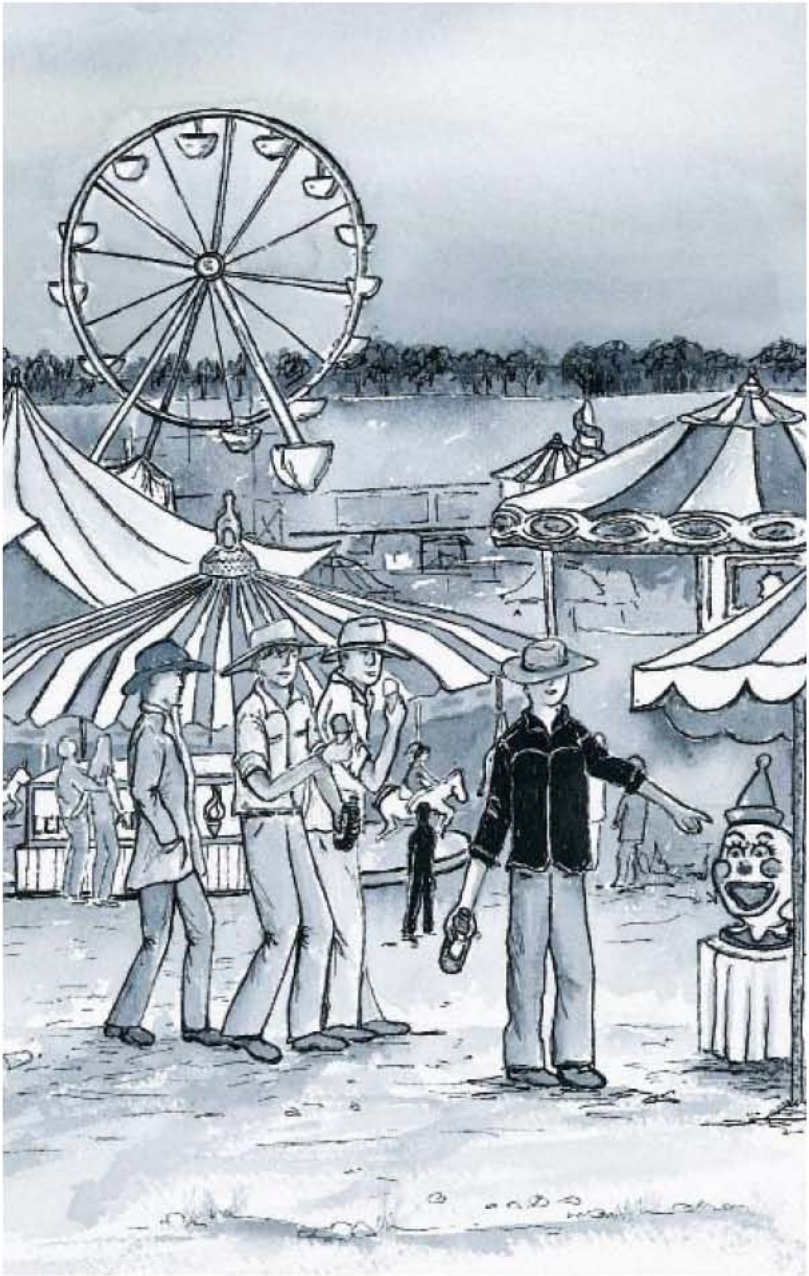
SHOW DAY

It was time for the annual Taree Show.* Bill and his mate, Tom, had arranged to meet at the entrance of the showground for a fun day. How excited they were when they got together. They had no restrictions, pockets full of hard-earned pocket money and a whole day to spend enjoying themselves.

They sat and watched the events in the arena, wandered around the displays of farm machinery and walked up and down the sideshows. There were all kinds of noisy amusements to entertain them and lots of sweet things to eat.

What a wonderful time they were having! The trouble was they were running out of money. By lunchtime, the boys only had enough money for a sandwich and a drink. But there were still many exciting things they wanted to see and do.

Bill and Tom met up with some friends, who talked excitedly about one sideshow tent that had performing dogs, clowns who could juggle while riding one-wheeled bikes, a fortune teller, a hypnotist, acrobats and a contortionist who



could tie herself in knots.

"Wow!" said Tom, "We must see that. Let's go."

"Wait," said Bill. "We don't have enough money."

Then Tom surprised Bill by saying, "Maybe we can sneak under the side of the tent before the show starts. You know how all the people stand on a plank outside the entrance, while a man beats a drum and calls out, inviting people to come in?"

"Yes," said Bill. "So what?"

"Well," replied Tom, "while everyone is around the front, we will look for a place to sneak in around the back."

By this time, the boys had found the tent and sure enough, there was a lot of noisy activity at the entrance.

"Come on," said Tom, "now is our chance."

"I don't like this," complained Bill.

"Aw," scolded Tom, "don't be scared."

As the boys were searching for a back entrance, a funny-looking man opened a tent flap and, on seeing the boys, he beckoned them over.

"Boys," he called, "would you like to earn some money?"

Tom rushed forward with an expectant look on his face, shouting, "Yes, me." Bill was discovering that Tom was full of surprises. He was seeing a side of Tom he had never seen before.

"Good," said the funny man, "I have a little job for you. I will give both of you free tickets for the show. You just sit in the audience and when Madame Mystery, the hypnotist, comes on to perform her act, she will ask for a volunteer."

Pointing to Tom, he then explained, "You will jump up and offer your service. She isn't really a hypnotist but you just do everything she tells you and make it look like you are in a trance. You will have fun and some money in your pocket."

"OK," said Tom enthusiastically, "that will be easy money."

After the strange man had disappeared back into the tent, Tom and Bill went around the front to join the crowd of eager customers, who were jostling their way into the tent.

Tom and Bill sat at the edge of a row near the centre of the stools, where they could easily see the performance. They were so engrossed in all that was happening, they had almost forgotten about Madame Mystery.

Suddenly, the lights dimmed and a husky voice announced "Madame Mystery," the highlight of the show. In floated a mysterious looking woman in long, flowing robes with moons, stars and planets painted in bright colours all over the material. She looked so pale, with long black hair, long eyelashes and long fingernails. She had a ghostly appearance. Everyone went quiet and there was a deathly silence as she looked over the audience.

Bill thought to himself, *I'm glad it's Tom and not me.*

When Madame Mystery spoke, it sent shivers up and down Bill's spine. When she called for a volunteer, Bill noticed Tom was not quick to respond. However, he eventually stood up and was called down to the front.

It was a funny performance, as she had Tom doing all kinds of weird things. As he warmed to the occasion, Tom did a good job of acting his part as he pretended to be hypnotised. But his performance nearly fell apart when Madame Mystery reached into a basket and pulled out an enormous snake.

From where he sat, Bill could see Tom's eyes bulging out like a gigantic snail. While Tom wasn't hypnotised, he was mesmerised as Madame Mystery draped the snake around his neck and let it envelope his body.

Poor Tom was still shaking when they went for refreshments to put the hard-earned money to good use an hour later.

"Do you think it was worth it?" asked Bill, looking up from his double-chocolate milkshake.

"Maybe," replied Tom. "I did learn a lesson about rushing in where angels fear to tread. I owe you an apology, Bill, for pushing in and being selfish."

"It's okay," grinned Bill. "I wouldn't have carried if off as well as you did. I would have fainted when she pulled out that snake."

"We learned a valuable lesson about deception though, didn't we?" said Tom thoughtfully.

When the two boys went their separate ways, they were convinced they had grown a little more mature and much wiser as a result of their day at the Taree Show.

THE LOADED GUN

It was some weeks before Bill met up again with his mate Tom. As Tom came toward him, Bill noticed he was limping and had a big bandage around his leg.

"What happened to you?" asked Bill. "You look like you have been in a war."

"Not really," replied Tom, "but I did get shot."

"Really!" exclaimed Bill in astonishment. "How did that happen?"

"Let's sit here and I'll tell you the story," said Tom.

"Our farm is suffering due to a plague of rabbits. There have been trappers and shooters staying in caravans for months but there are still too many rabbits."

Tom winced as he shifted his bandaged leg.

"I pestered Dad to buy me a rifle, so I could learn how to shoot and earn some pocket money from selling the skins," continued Tom. "Eventually he agreed but he first made some rules that he insisted I follow."

Tom went on to explain how his dad had made a list of

rules for Tom to follow, as part of the process of learning how to handle a rifle. One rule he kept emphasising was the importance of keeping the gun unloaded when walking about, riding on motorbikes or in trucks. Another rule was the safety catch must be kept on at all times.

A few days before meeting up with Bill, Tom was hunting with his dog, Spot, in an isolated area of country at the back of his father's property. He found a place where rabbits were running everywhere. He was shooting away, thinking of what to do with all the money he would earn from the sale of the skins. As he worked his way through the scrub,* he came to a barbed wire fence. The strands were close together and very tight. This was the boundary fence, which was kept in good order.

Tom decided to go through the fence in search of more rabbits. As he struggled to edge his way between the strands of barbed wire, the trigger of his rifle caught on one of the sharp barbs.

Unfortunately for Tom, he had broken two rules. His gun was loaded and the safety catch was off.

There was a loud bang and a bullet went through the calf muscle of Tom's left leg. Tom gave a yell and fell back on the ground, tearing his trousers and badly scratching his shoulder on the sharp barbs of the wire.

Tom tried to walk but he was in shock and the pain was too severe. He just lay on the ground, moaning as the blood soaked his trousers and ran into the dirt. He was frightened he might bleed to death before anyone found him.

Spot tried to comfort him with generous licks and whimpers but Tom wasn't in the mood. Then Tom realised Spot might be his only hope.

"Go home," he yelled at Spot.

Poor Spot looked shocked at his master's harsh words.

"Go on, go home. Get, go home," persisted Tom.

Spot wondered what he had done wrong but as Tom continued to shout at him, he put his tail between his legs and slunk away. He went a little way then stopped to look back, in the hope that Tom might change his mind but Tom just yelled all the more for him to go home.

Spot trotted off through the scrub, over the hills, past the dam and onto the cattle track that led all the way to the stockyards near the house.

Tom's mum was busy hanging out the washing when she noticed Spot standing outside the garden gate, looking miserable.

"What's wrong with you, old boy?" she called out.

Spot gave a bark that suggested something was wrong.

"Where is Tom?" his mum asked. Spot could only stare at her with a sad look on his face. When he failed to wag his tail at the sound of Tom's name, she knew something was wrong.

Tom's dad was working in the hayshed, so his mum went over to share her concern. When Tom's dad looked at Spot, he could see all was not well.

"Where's Tom?" he asked Spot, who barked, and ran out of the shed and down to the cattle track.

Tom's mum and dad decided Tom must be hurt. His dad hurried off to get the truck, while his mum collected the first aid kit and a blanket.

Spot took off along the track at such a speed that the farm truck was hard pressed to keep up. When the anxious dog left the track and headed into the small hills that made up the back paddock, Tom's parents had to leave the truck and follow on foot.

After some time, working their way through the scrub and

stumbling over the rough, stony ground, they heard Spot barking and Tom's cries for help.

Poor Tom was in a bad way. He needed urgent medical attention. His parents did the best they could to stop the flow of blood with bandages and general first aid. Then his dad picked him up and carried him all the way to the truck, where they wrapped him in the blanket and laid him out on the back.

Tom's mum sat with him, his head in her lap, while his dad drove as carefully as he could back to the homestead.

It seemed to take forever to get to the hospital but soon Tom was resting between clean, white sheets, while nurses fussed about, trying to make him comfortable.

"So you see, Bill, I caused all this trouble to myself and my family because I was careless and failed to follow the rules," confessed Tom.

"You certainly learned the hard way but you will never forget again after that experience. You are lucky Spot did what he was told. Maybe animals are more obedient than we are," Bill laughed.

BRUCE AND THE HENS

One of Bill's chores was to care for more than 200 hens. Every morning and evening, he had to mix the grains and fill the feed troughs. He had to collect the eggs, top up the water containers and, once a week, clean out the sheds. It was a lot of work but Bill didn't mind—he treated the happy hens as his pets.

The worst job was disposing of any dead hens lying about in the yards. With so many hens, one would die every so often and Bill's dad insisted that every dead hen must be buried. This was to stop the spread of disease and prevent wild animals from being attracted to the area.

Most of the time, Bill followed the instructions. But there were times when he was in a hurry, so he would throw the dead hens into the middle of a big blackberry patch behind the feedshed. They all seemed to disappear, so he assumed the rats and goannas were enjoying a free lunch.

One day, Bill and his parents were out visiting friends. It was getting dark when they drove up the track and nosed the

old farm truck into its shed. As they were walking down to the house, they saw a dead hen lying on the grass. Then they saw another—and another—and another. In fact, they were everywhere. On close inspection, some were still alive but all had been chewed. There were feathers scattered all over the place.

Bill's dad looked shocked as he surveyed the mess.

"Where are the dogs?" he asked. "They usually come out to greet us."

The old farmhouse was up on stumps, with enough room for the dogs and cats to crawl under. Bill decided to look under the house to see if they might be hiding in fear—or maybe guilt.

Sure enough, the four dogs were hiding and each of them had a guilty look on their face. The worst was Bruce—the big, black setter—who had a white feather stuck on his nose.

Bruce had quite a reputation as a hunter. He may not have been fast enough to catch a rabbit but was quick to smell them and flush them out from their hiding places. The smaller dogs were the ones that did the catching. Bruce would find a snake or goanna but it was Toss, the fox terrier, or Trixy, the cattle dog, who did the hunting.

There were times when Bruce would lead the little pack off into the bush and they would stay away for two or three days. On their return, they always looked like unkempt bush dogs, but also looked pleased with themselves, with fat stomachs.

Bill was shocked when his dad declared, "Bruce has to be destroyed!"

"No!" cried Bill. "We must give him another chance."

"Sorry, Bill," soothed his dad, "now that he has a taste for chicken, he will be a constant problem."

Then Bill was more shocked when his dad asked, "I wonder

how he got a taste for chicken in the first place? Did you bury all the dead hens like I requested, Bill?"

Bill was in a spot. The episode was turning into a drama.

"Well . . . not every time," stammered Bill. "Sometimes when I was in a hurry, I threw them into the middle of the big blackberry patch.

"Hmmm," mused his ad, "he must have dug in under the bushes to get at the dead birds.So, seeing you are the real cause of all this mess, you can collect up all the dead and dying hens and bury them. It will also be your job to put all the injured ones out of their misery."

Bill had to bury 39 hens, which required quite a large hole to be dug—and in the hard ground, too.

What a lesson Bill learned, as he worked on after dark to complete his task. It really does pay to do as you are told and not to take short cuts.

TAKING WAYS

It was school holidays and Bill, with four of his mates, had persuaded their parents to let them go to town on the bus for a shopping trip.

At the bus stop, while they waited for the bus that was always late, they compared their wealth. Bill had enough for his lunch, which he had decided would be a curried egg and lettuce sandwich, a lamington* and a carton of chocolate milk. He also had enough pocket money to buy a penknife, for which he had been saving for months.

Two of the boys were a little richer than Bill, while the other two were a bit poorer. However, they were all determined to have as much fun as time would allow.

They chatted away as the old bus ground its way over the hills and around the bends, bumping over the gravel road that led to the country town of Taree on the Manning River.

As soon as they were among the shops, it was off to get ice-cream. Then they licked their way up and down both sides of the main street, gazing at the various window displays.

"This is a lot of fun," said Ron. "But my money is burning a hole in my pocket. Why don't we do some shopping and see who can buy the most things."

"Let's go to Woolies," one of the boys suggested.

They all agreed, so off they went to the big Woolworths store, which stocked just about everything a boy could imagine.

In those days, there were no "checkouts." Instead, there were big counters that ran from one end of the store to the other. The salespeople walked up and down behind the counters, which displayed all the many and varied items for sale. When the customers selected what they wanted, they beckoned to a salesperson, who would come and wrap up the item and take the money.

The boys wandered up and down, looking at this and that, but Bill noticed none of his mates were buying anything. He selected a strong, useful looking penknife, some pencils and two chocolate bars. As soon as he had pocketed the change, he went to join his mates but they were nowhere to be seen.

"That's strange," he thought. "I wonder where they disappeared to."

Realising they were no longer in the store, he walked out to the footpath, where one of the boys was waiting for him.

"Come on, Bill," he called, "the others are waiting for us down on the riverbank."

When they found the other three boys, they were sitting in a circle, looking at a small pile of objects scattered over a piece of newspaper.

"What are you doing?" inquired Bill.

"Oh, just checking out our loot," laughed the eldest of the boys. "What did you snitch,* Bill?" he asked with a sly grin.

Bill showed them his paper bag with the Woolworths brand on it and proceeded to remove the contents.

"Did you pay for these things?" asked one of the boys.

"Yes," said Bill, "how else would I have them?"

The four boys rolled around on the grass, holding their stomachs and pretending to burst with laughter.

"You're a slug, Bill," sneered one of the boys. "We never pay for the things we pick up from Woolies. Snitching the things we fancy is half the fun."

"Yes," said another, "we have all these things and we still have our pocket money."

"What a dope you are, Bill," they laughed. "You have lived in the bush for too long. You need to get smart."

Bill was offended, then angry, then disappointed. He had never dreamed these boys would stoop to stealing and then laugh about it. When the boys saw the look on Bill's face, they stopped their joking and began to gather up their ill-gotten gain. It was their turn to look shocked when Bill declared they should return the items they had stolen and confess to the manager of the store.

"You've got to be kidding!" said the oldest boy. "If you want to be a goody-goody, that's your choice but we are keeping our takings. Listen Bill, they rich people own those shops. They will never miss the few miserable things we helped ourselves to. So wake up, this is the real world."

Bill was sad the boys failed to see they had broken the law and God's commandments. Such greed and selfishness would no doubt prove a problem to these boys in later life. And in some cases, it did.

Bill walked away by himself. His lunch didn't taste as good as he had hoped. What was to be an exciting day with friends, turned out to be an unhappy event but at least he could show his mum and dad his purchases without feeling guilty.

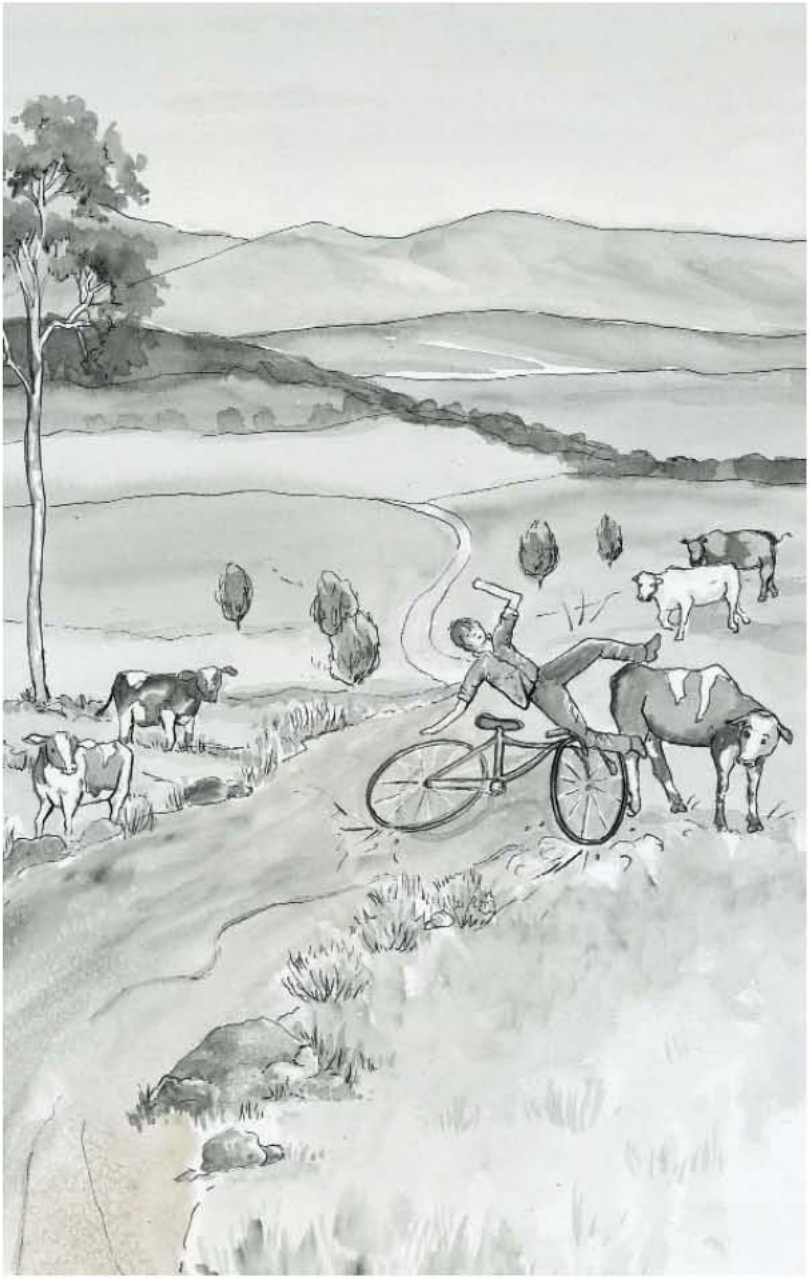
A WANDERING HEIFER

It was summer holidays—a time to be out and about. Bill and his parents decided to have a week away, visiting some friends who were dairy farmers. A neighbour agreed to look after their animals so their time away would be a real break.

Life on a dairy farm was different from the activity Bill and his parents were used to on their property. Their friends began their day before sun-up and hardly stopped until it was dark. The main event was the daily routine of milking the cows. Then there were calves to feed, a vegetable garden to maintain, fruit to pick, crops to supervise, fences to repair and lots of other jobs demanding attention. There was no end to the many and varied tasks needing to be done. Bill and his parents wondered how dairy farmers could ever have a holiday.

One morning after breakfast, the farmer announced he had to go to a lecture on cattle breeding. Bill and his dad were free to amuse themselves.

Bill had noticed some pushbikes in the shed, so he suggested they dust them down, pump up the tyres and go for a ride



along the country road that passed through the farms.

"Good idea," said his dad, "I feel like some exercise."

They went down to the shed to see what condition the bikes were in and were surprised to find them in a good state of repair. There was a half-sized bike for Bill and a full-sized man's bike for his dad.

They really enjoyed riding along the bush track that wound its way past patches of eucalyptus trees, open paddocks, corn fields and market gardens.

As Bill and his dad rode around a corner, they found themselves in an open paddock with cows on either side of the road. The cows looked contented and uninterested in the two riders. It was then they noticed the track went up a steep hill.

"Maybe it's time we went back," suggested Bill, eyeing the hill.

"Maybe," responded his dad, "but we may get a good view from up there. We can walk up, pushing the bikes in front of us," he encouraged. "Then if it isn't too steep, we can ride back down."

"OK," agreed Bill. "Let's go."

So off they went, puffing their way to the top of the hill.

It was a good view. As they sat on a log, they could see for miles in all directions. They could see blue hills covered in forests, green paddocks dotted with fat cows, patches of various crops and the Manning River, snaking its weary way through the farmlands.

Bill's dad eventually broke the silence, saying it was time to head back. They should arrive at the house just in time for lunch. Bill liked the sound of that, as the farm meals were delicious.

"Race you to the bottom," Bill challenged.

"Hey, not so fast," warned his dad. "This hill is too steep and

the track has ruts, bumps and patches of loose gravel. It would be best if we walked the bikes down to the level ground."

"Aw! Come on, Dad," pleaded Bill. "It's not that steep."

"Yes it is, Bill," said his dad. "Let's not take risks. We will get back soon enough."

Bill thought his dad was scared and needed to be shown how well he could handle the pushbike at high speed. Bill had a bike at home and spent a lot of time riding bush tracks, while his dad hardly ever went near his rusty old bike. Bill couldn't miss an opportunity to show his dad how well he could control a bike.

So, before his dad could stop him, Bill jumped on his bike and was off down the hill. He soon picked up speed and was hurtling downhill at a frightening pace.

At the bottom of the hill, the contented cows were enjoying the lush grass and doing what cows do. Some were grazing, while others were sitting about chewing their cud. They looked like people chewing gum. There were young calves frolicking about and a big, black bull standing in the shade of a gum tree.

On one side of the track, a black-and-white heifer was wandering about, teasing some of the grazing cows and showing off. Evidently, her mother was on the other side of the track for as soon as she saw and heard Bill rattling down the hill, whooping with delight, she decided to seek her mother's protection. The heifer had no concept of speed, so was not in any great hurry to cross to where her mother was grazing.

Bill was going so fast that he was struggling to control the speeding bicycle and he could see he was on a collision course with the heifer. He had nowhere to go, so he closed his eyes and waited for the bang.

Immediately after the impact, Bill flew over the handlebars,

soared over the heifer and landed in an undignified manner on the grass. He skidded along until his head smacked into a large stone, hidden by a tuft of grass.

Bill was out cold for about 10 minutes. As he came to, he saw birds, stars, moons and cows, all following each other in circles around his head. As his mind cleared, the ache in his head felt like he had been hit by a lump of wood.

Bill's dad cradled him on his lap and stroked his bruised forehead. Bill had a lump the size of a marble and a slight cut above his left eye. He had a few cuts on his legs and some bruises that would remind him of his adventure for some time.

"That was some ride," said his dad, with an edge of irritation to his voice. "Why did you rush off like that when I warned you against it?"

"I wanted to show you how well I could control the pushbike," Bill whimpered. "I didn't expect that stupid cow to walk out in front of me."

"The trouble is," declared his dad, "cows have a mind of their own and we always have to prepare for the unexpected."

"I hope you have learned a lesson from this experience Bill," said his dad. "It doesn't pay to take risks because we can't always guess the outcome."

The ride home seemed a long way and dinner was not as enjoyable as Bill had expected. All he wanted was to lie still with a cold pack on his head, while his dad told and retold the story of the wandering heifer.

THE THUNDERSTORM

It was a cold, grey, drizzly day, with not a breath of wind. There was a strange stillness that set a mood of expectation. The birds had disappeared, the hens were all huddled in their sheds and the dogs had their tails between their legs. The cat was hiding inside the house and the black hen had settled in the corner of the toolshed, with her brood of nine chickens nestled among her warm feathers.

The storm struck at about 11 in the morning. It followed the valley, moving swiftly up the rise with the driving rain that came in sheets, followed by strong gusts of wind.

The flashes of lightning grew brighter, and the booming thunder became louder and louder as the storm approached, signalling to Bill it was time to hide under his bed. Trixy, the cattle dog, and Toss, the fox terrier, were eager to join him in order to escape the frightening sights and sounds.

Bill pulled the quilt down to floor level so they were in total darkness. With his fingers in his ears, he and the two dogs huddled in silence.

Bill's dad came up for lunch a little earlier than usual. He was soaked to the skin and quite irritated over the inconvenience caused by the storm.

"Where is Bill?" he asked.

"Hiding under the bed," replied Bill's mum. "He is still scared of these bad thunderstorms."

"It's time he got over his childish fears," growled his dad. "Here I am working in the open, cutting down trees while the storm rages all around me. There is nothing to be afraid of."

"Maybe," mused Bill's mum, "but it is interesting all the birds and animals have gone into hiding."

"They just don't like getting wet," scoffed Bill's dad. "If that storm comes back as they often do, I am going to march him down the paddock in the height of its fury, just to prove there is nothing to be afraid of."

Bill was listening from under his bed, praying the storm would go away and never return. The storm had eased off when his mum called him for lunch. The flashes of lightning had gone but he could still hear the thunder booming away in the distance.

Lunchtime was usually a good time for Bill and his parents. But on this occasion, Bill's dad spoiled the meal by lecturing him on the many reasons why he should not be scared of thunderstorms. He explained how it was possible to tell how far away the eye of the storm was by counting the number of seconds between the flash of lightning and the boom of thunder. The number of seconds would indicate how many miles away the centre of the storm was.

"Yes," said Bill, "and when they both come together, look out! When that happens, I would rather be under my bed."

It was time for Bill's dad to prove a point.

"Listen to me, Bill," he insisted, "this old house has been

here for many years. There is no sign of it ever having been hit by lightning. Then there are all the big trees surrounding us. Some are green, while some are dead—having been ringbarked—but none of them have been damaged by lightning."

As they were talking, Bill was horrified to hear a loud thunder clap.

"There you are," encouraged Bill's dad, "the storm is returning, so let's go out and get among it."

Bill knew it was hopeless to argue with his dad when he was determined to prove a point. Reluctantly, he put on his raincoat and gumboots, and slowly followed his dad down the track to the charcoal pits, where Bill's dad and his men had been unloading timber, ready for firing.

The storm moved in quickly and, like a ferocious beast, started to flash and roar as though determined to destroy everything in its path. At this point, the dogs deserted them, seeking refuge in some nearby scrub.

"Come on, Bill," encouraged his dad. "Let's walk a little way down toward the dam. It must be full by now. This heavy rain will fill all the tanks and dams for miles around."

Bill wasn't all that interested in the water supply—he was so scared, he was sweating in spite of the cold rain. He was as wet on the inside as he was on the outside.

"Do we have to?" whined Bill. "This is a monster storm and I'm getting wet. Couldn't we go home now? I promise to never hide under the bed when a storm comes."

"Don't be a sook," growled his dad. "There is nothing to worry about. Besides, the eye of the storm hasn't reached us yet."

Bill wasn't counting anymore, as the flashes and claps of thunder were getting closer and closer together.

Then it happened. Flash! Bang! The noise was deafening and the impact knocked Bill flat on his back. He had never been so scared in all his life. Even his dad looked shocked. The lightning had struck a huge, old, dead ironbark tree, which had exploded right in front of them. Lumps of wood that even four men couldn't lift were thrown in all directions. One section of the tree trunk, with a broken branch attached, landed a few feet from Bill and his dad with a loud thud.

His dad was trembling as he tried to take it all in. He looked pale as he helped Bill to his feet. They walked over to the jagged stump, which was all that was left of the old ironbark. It was blackened and smouldering. No doubt, it would have caught fire if the rain hadn't been so heavy.

"We could have been killed if we had been a few feet closer to that tree," whispered Bill.

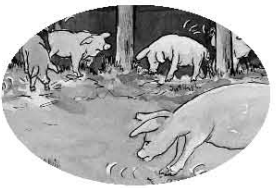
"Yes," replied his dad, "the track goes right past it."

The storm was still booming its way up the valley but Bill was too stunned to notice, as he and his dad walked thoughtfully back to the house.

Bill's mum was standing in the kitchen doorway with a frightened look on her face.

"You could have been killed by that lightning strike," she scolded. "What a senseless act that was."

"Yes," replied Bill's dad sheepishly. "I guess I learned a big lesson today. We must respect each other's fears and not force anyone to take risks in order to prove a point."



RUNAWAY PIGS

Bill's dad decided to get some pigs but Bill's mum was not happy about the idea. She hated pigs. But the cows were producing more milk than was needed so it was a smart move, according to Bill's dad, to buy a boar and a couple of sows.

"We will soon have lots of piglets to play with and it could prove profitable," he predicted.

So Bill and his dad got busy building a pigpen. They spent a number of days on the project, as the pen had to be strong. It had to include a shelter, a gate and a trough. As soon as the pens were built, a family of pigs arrived—two sows and a boar. Bill had enough to do caring for all the hens, so his dad agreed to care for the pigs.

"They look dangerous to me," commented Bill.

"No!" said his dad. "They're harmless. They will soon become like pets. When the piglets arrive, you can choose one for a pet and, in no time, it will follow you like a dog."

As time went by, his dad's predictions came true. Bill called his selection "Willie Wig the Pig." And Willy did follow him

around like a dog. He was so devoted to Bill, the dogs were jealous. They would snap and growl at Willy whenever Bill wasn't looking.

One day, a terrified boy from a neighbouring family three kilometres (about two miles) away came knocking on the kitchen door.

"Mrs," he stammered with wide, frightened eyes, "your pigs are eating our house."

"Dear me," responded Bill's mum. "How could that be? Bill, go and check the pigpens."

Bill raced up the hill to the cowyard, behind which were the pigpens. What a shock he got when he found them empty! Both gates were broken, with not a pig in sight.

As he ran back down the hill to the house, Bill was wondering how he would manage to drive the pigs all the way across the paddocks back to their pens.

"Please hurry," urged the boy. "The pigs have our family bailed up in the house. They are terrified."

Bill agreed to go with the boy and try to coax the adventurous pigs back home. Before they set off, Bill had an idea. The pigs loved corn, so maybe they would follow him home if he laid a trail of corn. Quickly, he scooped up a small bag of corn kernels from the feedshed and sped across the paddocks to the neighbour's house.

What a chaotic scene met the two boys when they arrived! The house was built on stumps, about one metre high, as the area was prone to floods. The boy's mother, brothers and sisters were looking out the windows. They looked as frightened as the passengers on the *Titanic*. Under the house were the pigs, grunting and squealing as they cleaned up the rubbish these not-so-tidy people had left there over the weeks and months. They were having a great party as they

vacuumed up the muck.

They were enjoying the food scraps, rotten fruit and some pumpkins stored in a dark corner. They were also into a bag of wheat, meant for feeding the hens. All the noise had convinced these backward people the pigs were eating their house, and it soon would tumble down, exposing the family to the grunting monsters.

Bill assured the family that the pigs were quite harmless. To prove his point, he went under the house, drove them out, and called them with the call he and his dad used at feeding time. They followed him out of the yard and he quickly shut the gate. Then he threw some corn on the grass, which they munched with grunts and squeals of delight.

Bill waved to the relieved neighbours and promised the pig invasion would not happen again. "Let us know how much we owe you for the damage," he shouted. Soon he was slowly walking home with the pigs following behind, munching on the corn kernels he scattered along the way.

That night, as the family sat enjoying the evening meal, they discussed Bill's adventure with the pigs.

"I think they felt their need for a mud bath in the dam," suggested Bill's dad. "From there, it isn't all that far to the neighbour's house."

"So they broke out to get to the dam, then went on to explore?" asked Bill.

"That would be my guess," responded his dad.

"Well, it may have taught the neighbours a lesson," suggested Bill's mum.

"Yes," added Bill, "it pays to be clean and tidy inside and outside the house, doesn't it?"

"Very true, Bill," smiled his mum, "and don't you forget it."

And he never did.

LOST AT THE SHOW

Bill's mum decided she would take him to Sydney to attend the Royal Easter Show. Bill was so excited he could hardly eat. Leading up to their departure, he would wake at night, imagining all the wonderful things he would see and do at the show.

Getting there was part of the fun. There was the bus trip to Taree, then the long day's journey on the steam train. Finally, there would be a ride in the electric train from Central Railway Station to their friends' place, where they would stay for a week.

Everything went according to plan and the day came when they were off to the show. Bill had some pocket money he had saved up for months. What fun it would be deciding what to spend it on!

It was a hot, sunny day and the showground was crowded with thousands of eager people, trying to see as much as they could—and as quickly as possible. All morning, Bill and his mum explored the exhibits, the sideshows and the animal

pavilions. By midday, they were finding all the noise, crowds of people and walking up and down a bit too much. He was glad when his mum suggested they get some food and drink, and take it to the grandstand. They could sit and enjoy their lunch while they watched the events in the main arena.

It seemed an age by the time they moved up to the counter and purchased their choice of food. They were quite worn out by the time they found a seat in the grandstand and settled down to enjoy their meal. But they soon forgot their tiredness as they watched all the action in the arena.

As soon as the food was devoured, Bill announced that he needed to go to the toilet.* His mum made an unwise decision. She suggested she would stay in the grandstand to mind their seats while Bill went off in search of a toilet.

"Just take careful notice of the landmarks so you can find your way back," his mum instructed.

"OK," Bill said, as he rushed down the aisle to the open gate that led to the busy, crowded walkway.

Unfortunately, Bill was in a hurry and forgot to notice where he was going. In his haste to locate the toilets, he was soon mixed up in the moving mass of people coming and going.

Eventually, he spotted a sign that promised to solve his problem. However, when Bill emerged back into the crush of people, he realised he was lost!

Bill had been lost in the bush a number of times but this was frighteningly different. There were people everywhere but no-one was interested in him or his problem.

Then, to his great relief, he saw two policemen coming toward him.

"Excuse me," he stammered, "Can you please help me? I'm lost."

He told them about his mum in the grandstand but they

just shook their heads, explaining that there were many grandstands.

"We will take you to the Lost Property Office," they decided. So Bill was escorted through the now curious crowd to the Lost Property Office, where he was told to sit and wait for his mum to come and claim him.

Bill waited and waited but there was no sign of his mum. One hour went by, then a second hour came and went. Bill was getting very worried and so was the attendant.

When Bill's mum realised he was lost, she went searching for the Lost Property Office. The problem was, there were four of them scattered around the showground.

Bill's mum had a map of the showground but it was not easy to follow. The first Lost Property Office she came to had no lost boys waiting to be found. It was quite a long walk to the next one, as the Sydney Royal Showground was a huge place. It takes about three days to see everything.

At the second Lost Property Office, there was no sign of Bill either. Bill's mum asked the attendant if she would contact the other two offices by phone, which she agreed to do. Yes, there was a lost boy at the third office. So off she went, following the map and the kind woman's directions.

Bill's mum was relieved but nearly worn out when she finally located the room where a forlorn looking Bill was waiting.

"What happened, Bill?" she gasped. "Didn't you look out for landmarks like I told you?"

"Sorry, Mum," Bill answered. "I was in such a hurry and there were so many people, I didn't stop to check the signs or the landmarks as I rushed along."

"Well, Bill, we have lost half a day over this. I hope you have learned a good lesson," said his mum.

On the way home on the bus, Bill's mum took the

opportunity to point out that the Bible is full of landmarks we should take careful note of. There is the importance of being kind, forgiving, unselfish, obedient and many more.

"If we rush through life ignoring all these important signs, we will get lost for sure," his mum reflected.

ANGRY ANTS

Bill had a reputation for tormenting animals—and even people, if they let him. He loved to give the dogs a piece of sticky toffee. He would roll on the grass, crying with laughter as the dogs nearly turned themselves inside out, trying to dislodge the toffee from their teeth.

When he went exploring the bush tracks with the dogs, he would use a stick to hit the ants' nests he found along the way. He was always amazed at how quickly the rounded surface of the nest would be swarming with thousands of angry ants, ready to do battle with any intruders.

As the ants ran hither and thither, there never seemed to be a collision. Bill wondered who was directing the traffic.

While out bushwalking with his dad one day, his dad showed him some of the interesting creatures found under logs. The old, rotting logs were the most interesting. They found centipedes, scorpions, spiders, grubs, cockroaches, lizards, small snakes and many strange ants, small and large.

Bill realised there was a whole world of living things just

out of sight. When you searched under stones, bushes and logs, there were amazing discoveries to be made.

On one of his excursions, Bill found a rotting log near a large ants' nest. This nest belonged to a large, ferocious variety of ants. They were called "red ants." They had big nippers and a very nasty sting.

Bill decided to check out the inhabitants living under the log. He found a sturdy stick and managed to lever the log over until the wildlife were exposed for his examination. There were lots of creepy-crawlies trying to escape. There were a number of large centipedes, some scorpions, a blue-tongue lizard, a snake that quickly disappeared and lots of cockroaches.

Suddenly, Bill had a "bright idea." It would be fun to drop a centipede on the ants' nest and watch the ensuing battle. He soon found two sticks that suited his purpose. After some careful juggling, he managed to grip the centipede and carry it over to the red ants' nest.

Soon, there was a battle royal but the centipede was hopelessly outnumbered. It was quickly dissected and carried down below. Next, Bill dropped a scorpion on the nest and another battle raged.

As Bill continued with his activities, he hadn't noticed the dogs moving back further and further from the battleground. They had seen the ants moving out from the mound, ready to pounce on anyone or anything invading their territory.

Bill decided to drop one more nasty-looking centipede on the nest before heading home to do his evening chores. As he stood close to the nest, gently manoeuvring the next victim into place, a number of red ants were clambering over his shoes, heading up his socks in search of some juicy leg meat.

They must have sent out a signal and soon there were dozens of angry ants charging up his legs.

Zap! Zap! Ouch! Ouch! Bill was jumping around like a startled wallaby. The ants must have known they wouldn't be there long, so they got in as many stings and bites as they could.

Bill was yelling with fright and pain as he tried to brush the persistent little warriors off his legs and shoes. He went running back along the track, anxious to get home as soon as he could. He knew his mum had a special bottle of medicine she kept handy for stings and bites.

As he sat in the kitchen, crying in pain, his mum wanted to know how he got so many stings. Bill often got one or two stings from encounters with soldier ants and the occasional bull ant but this time there were dozens of red lumps forming on his legs.

Bill confessed to his wrongdoing, knowing a lecture would follow.

"It serves you right, Bill," scolded his mum. "You shouldn't be mean to God's little creatures. We should leave them to get on with their lives while we get on with ours. I hope you have learned a good lesson today."

Bill thought it was more like a bad lesson. He couldn't see anything good in it. But he did keep away from ants' nests after that! And he decided to leave the little creatures hidden under logs and rocks in peace.

WILMA THE WALLABY

One bright, sunny Sunday, Bill decided to go hunting with the dogs. Their kind of hunting was pretty harmless. They chased rabbits who outran them, disappearing into their burrows or hollow logs. They bailed up goannas who ran up tall gum trees. Then there were always a kangaroo or two who quickly escaped, leaving the dogs tired and disappointed.

This day was like most days—a day to enjoy being among nature in the bush. The birds were singing, the cicadas were screeching their monotonous cry and the bush was rustling with life. Suddenly, they came across a clearing where a few wallabies were grazing. As the dogs roared into action, the wallabies scattered in all directions. One was a bit slow to get moving and Bill noticed she was carrying a large joey in her pouch.

Two of the dogs chose to chase her as she clumsily hopped away, down the track they had been following. Bill tried to call the dogs back but they were in pursuit mode, so all he could do was follow behind as fast as he could.

"Come back," he called. "Trixy, Toss, come back here."

But the two dogs were making so much noise they couldn't hear Bill. Besides, they were determined to catch this slow wallaby.

Bill soon gave up the chase and decided to head back to the clearing to wait for the dogs to return. As he rounded a bend in the bush track, Bill noticed a movement in the scrub.

That's strange, Bill thought as he turned to have a closer look. When he stepped off the track and parted the long grass, he was delighted to find a young joey.

The wallaby that the dogs were chasing must have thrown her joey into the bushes to save both of their lives. She would get away from the dogs now and come back later to retrieve her young.

Bill easily caught the frightened little animal. He scooped her up in his arms and headed for home. He decided that it would be special to have a pet wallaby to care for and tame.

Much to Bill's delight, his parents were also pleased with the idea. Another pet would make a welcome addition to the two cats, four dogs, numerous clucky hens with their little broods of coloured chickens, two ducks and a young calf that needed special care.

"You must remember, Bill, this little animal belongs to the wild," explained his dad. "And will need a lot of care."

They named her Wilma and prepared a place for her to sleep that would be similar to her mother's pouch. His mum nailed half a sugar bag onto the inside of the back door. Then she put some soft material in the bottom to make a comfortable bed for Wilma.

Wilma loved the imitation pouch. She dived in head first, then popped her head out, with her tail still poking up next to her left ear. A baby's bottle was obtained from the neighbours

and, in no time, she was enjoying the special brew Bill's mum prepared.

It took a few days to persuade the dogs to accept Wilma as a member of the family but as soon as they understood she was a pet who shared the family's affection, they became friends. Their playful antics provided hours of amusement for Bill and his parents.

Wilma would pull the dogs' ears and play tag around the yard. She loved to come from behind the toolshed and bound toward a hen with her brood of chickens, scattering them in all directions.

Most of the day, Wilma would sleep in her sugar bag. Her most active times were early in the morning and in the evenings. Then it was Bill's job to find her before dark and put her to bed with her bottle.

Bill would call Wilma by imitating the wallaby call— "kish! kish!"—and she would reply from wherever she happened to be, with her "kish! kish!" Then she would come bounding up to Bill for a hug and a scratch. She was playful and loved to chase Bill. When he lay down, she would pull his hair and lick his ears.

Wilma grew quickly and was soon too big for her sugar bag, so a bed was set up for her in the feedshed. When she outgrew the bottle, a special diet of Weet-bix and seeds supplemented her main meal of grass.

As she grew older and more independent, Wilma became harder and harder to call in the evenings and didn't always agree to being locked in the feedshed. One warm summer's evening, Bill called and called but there was no response. Being weary from a long, busy day, Bill decided to leave the feedshed door open and go to bed.

Bill never saw Wilma again. They were all very sad at her

disappearance and chided Bill for not persevering with his search. However, they all knew the call of the wild would lure her away one day. They just hoped she would be safe and happy out there somewhere in the bush.

THE BIG SHIFT

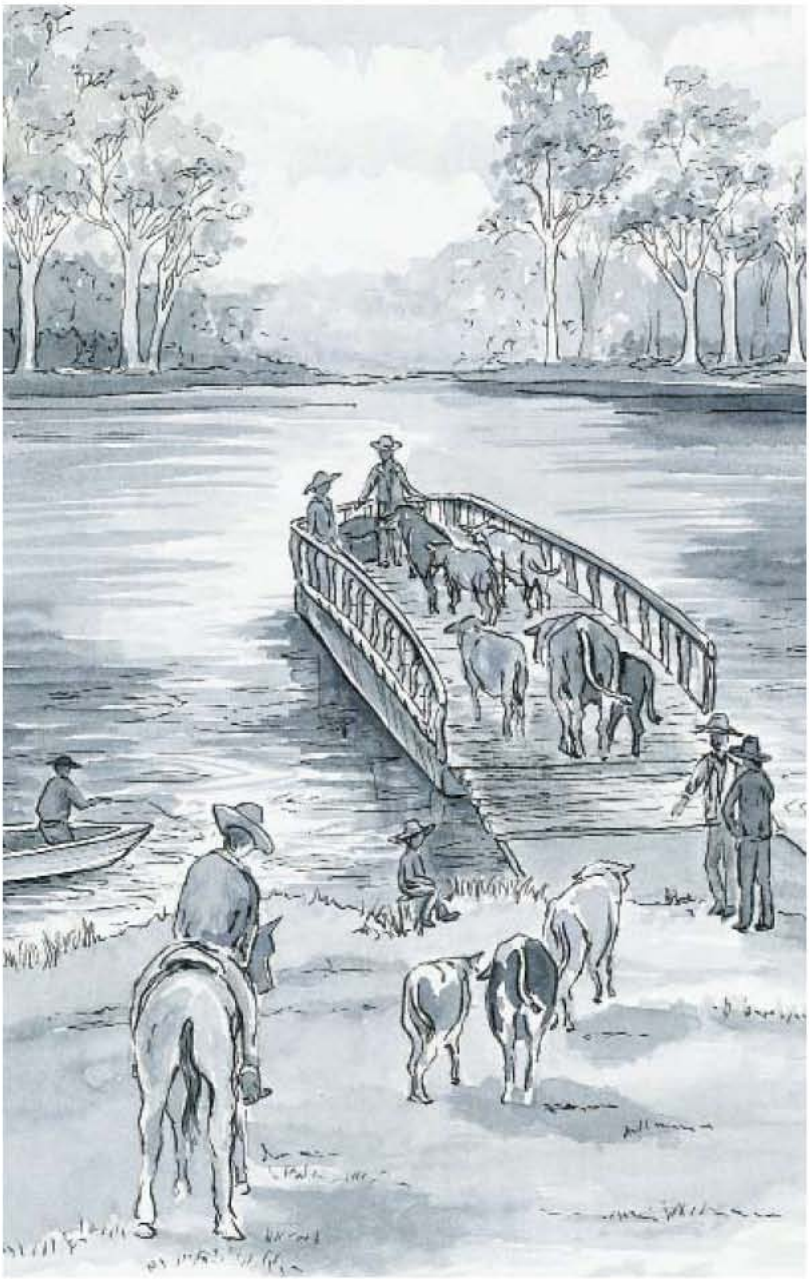
As World War II was drawing to a close, the demand for charcoal declined, so Bill's dad decided to return to his trade as a building contractor. He found a small property approximately five kilometres (three miles) outside the seaside town of Forster.

In those days, Forster was a fishing village with holiday cabins, a caravan park, a hotel and a few shops. It was a quiet place, with beautiful beaches and the huge Wallis Lakes.

Bill's dad was convinced the town would grow, providing him with plenty of work, so they packed up and moved to the old farmhouse on a hill, with 360-degree views overlooking One Mile Beach.

The faithful draft horses were sold but it was decided to keep the hens, as there were yards with pens on the new property. There was a good-sized paddock they could rent, so the 13 cows were also kept.

Bill's dad hired a couple of local stockmen to drive the herd the 15 kilometres (10 miles) from the farm to Forster.



In those days, there was no bridge—only a punt with a powerboat attached. Thus the punt—or ferry, as some liked to call the six-car "flat top"—motored around the sandbars from Tuncurry to Foster. The trip took half an hour but could take hours if the punt got stuck on a sandbar.

The stockmen had a lot of fun persuading the cattle to walk onto the punt. It was all new to them—the smells, the sounds and the people were all too much. The punt had a ramp at each end, sides and gates, so once onboard, there was no escape.

Eventually, with the help of some passengers, a lot of noise, barking dogs and cracking stockwhips, the terrified animals were shut up safely on the swaying ferry.

Bill and his dad rode in the launch with the ferryman and his offsider. As they were cruising across the wide expanse of water that was the entrance to the Wollamba River, as well as Wallis Lakes, the ferryman told them about a terrible accident that had happened just a few days before.

"A group of young people were returning from Taree, where they had been to a party. They were all under the influence of alcohol and out of control. Their driver was showing off, trying to demonstrate how well he could drive his parents' new car," the boatman explained.

It was after midnight when they sped through the main street of Tuncurry, heading for the punt that would take them across the water to Foster. As they approached the ramp, they could see the lights of the punt and assumed that it was stationary, waiting for the last lot of cars for the day.

In his blurred state of mind, the driver thought the gates were open. He drove down the cement ramp, expecting to drive onto the wooden ramp of the ferry. Instead, there was a big gap of open water, as the ferry was still coming in.

It was high tide, so the water was deep. The car went straight down into the water and all the young people drowned. There were many heartbroken families at Forster when Bill and his parents arrived with their small herd of cows and household belongings. Most of the young people and many adults swore never to touch alcohol again as a result of this terrible loss.

It was quite a relief when Bill's dad closed the gate on the paddock and watched the cows sample the plentiful grass. They would soon adjust to their new surroundings and continue providing Bill's family with milk, butter and cream.

Bill loved the old farmhouse with its wide verandahs, fresh-water well and huge Moreton Bay Fig tree, with branches growing in all directions that could be easily climbed. Bill knew this new chapter in his life would provide many exciting adventures.

The best news of all was his parents agreeing it was time he had a horse of his own.

"Wow!" said Bill. "Surely life has just begun."

And maybe it had.

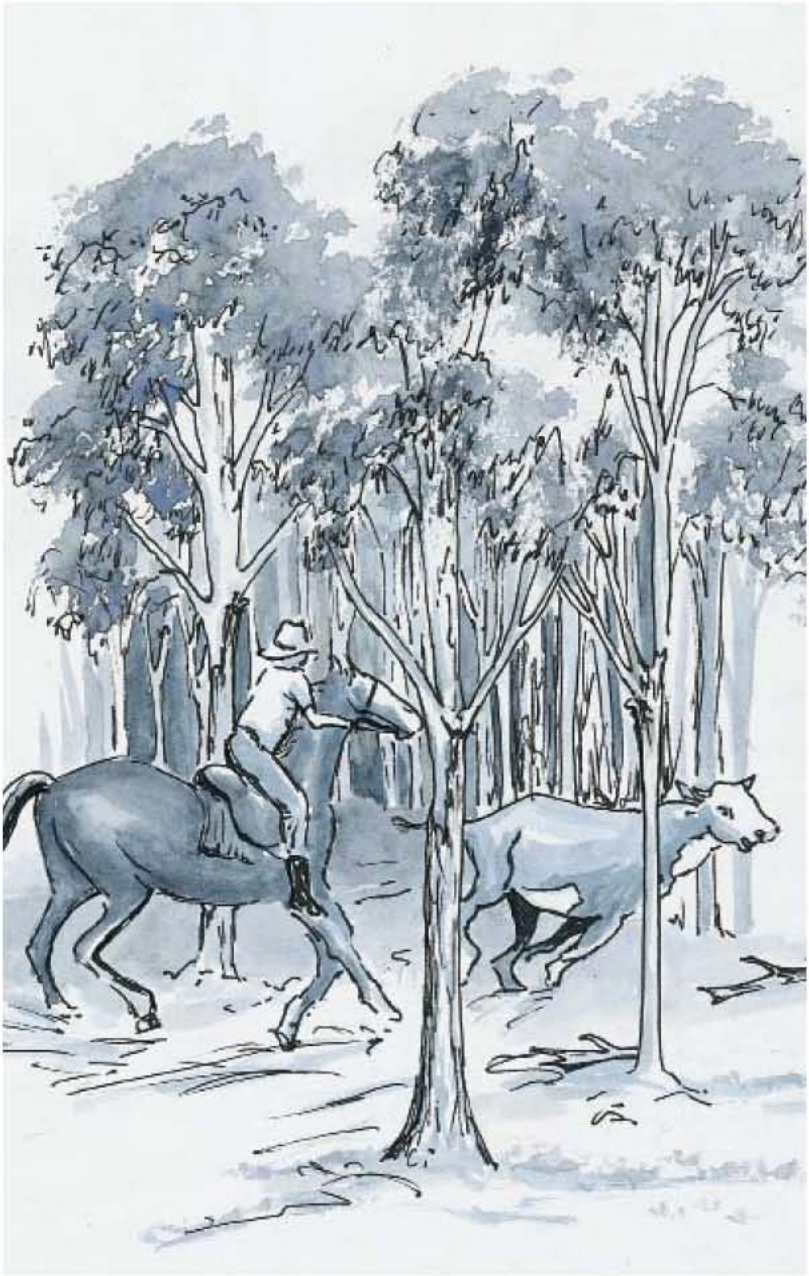
LOST IN THE BUSH

It didn't take Bill long to get acquainted with the horse-loving people in and around Forster. There was always something exciting happening on Sunday: cattle to be moved from one place to another or stock to be rounded up from open country, where they had been wandering for up to a year at a time.

Bill's neighbour, who had a dairy farm, taught Bill how to use a stockwhip, advised him on the best kind of riding boots and generally got him into a style of riding best suited for rough riding and cattle work.

On Friday afternoon, Bill was with some mates at their favourite cafe, enjoying half an ice-cream brick floating in chocolate sauce, when one of his horse-riding mates joined them.

"Have you heard the news?" Ron queried. "There is a big round-up on Sunday. All the cattle out on the moors are to be driven into old Jack's stockyard. This will be a big day. We all meet at the grey gum tree opposite Jenkins's place at 7 am."



That was exciting news.

"Tell me more, Ron. Will we take lunch? Are the cattle wild?" asked Bill excitedly.

Ron squeezed into the alcove where the boys were eating and gave a big suck on his milkshake straw. "This will be a big day with lots of adventure," warned Ron. "We will spend all morning chasing the cattle out of the scrub and running them all the way to the yards.

"Then old Jack will put on a lunch like you've never seen. After a short rest, we go to the yards where the fun really happens. There is branding, dehorning and separating yearlings from their mothers. There will be some buckjumping too."

"Phew!" the boys chorused. "We can't wait."

Bill was just getting used to his new horse. Champ was an experienced stock horse and a lot of fun to ride. The horse knew more about rounding up cattle than Bill did. It was all new and exciting for Bill, so he gave Champ some extra food mix to build up his strength for the big day.

On Sunday morning, the men and boys gathered at the big grey gum tree. On the crack of the whip, they headed off. The horses were all frisky, and the riders were laughing and joking as they discussed the expected events of the day.

After riding for an hour, they came to the tea-tree scrub where the cattle lived a happy, carefree life. Their peace was about to be shattered.

The riders spread out, just keeping each other in sight, and began to shout and yell as they cracked their stockwhips. Soon the scrub was too thick to use the whips but there was plenty of noise from barking dogs and yelling stockmen. The cows, calves, bulls and steers soon knew their domain was being invaded.

Bill was having the time of his life. Champ seemed to be

enjoying himself too, as they darted in and out of the paperbark trees, through clumps of thick scrub and over fallen logs.

Suddenly, they broke out into a clearing where the cattle tried to dodge the riders. One stocky steer did a sliding U-turn and fled into a thick patch of scrub. The head stockman yelled out to Bill, "Head him back, Bill, we want him."

Bill wheeled around and gave chase. The steer led Bill on a lively run in the direction from which they had come. The steer knew the territory better than Bill and soon disappeared. Bill found himself in a dense stand of saplings, vines and prickly bushes. Champ was not finding the going to his liking, so he chose to stay put. It was very quiet. No droving noises, no sounds of the runaway steer—absolutely nothing!

Bill realised he was trapped and, even worse, he was lost. An uncomfortable feeling crept over Bill as he considered his plight. He was on the verge of panic when he decided that he needed help. Bill knew the best help always comes from above, so he bowed his head and asked God for help. After his prayer, the thought came to mind that while he may be lost, the horse was not, so he let Champ have his head.

Bill managed to persuade Champ to force his way out of the thicket and into open bush. The horse then turned left and headed straight through the paperbark trees until they came out onto a track, which led to the road they had been on earlier.

A fast canter soon brought them up to the other riders, who had the mob bunched together. Bill apologised for losing the steer and was given the task of pushing the stragglers.

The later events of the day are another story but Bill's experience with the runaway steer taught him a valuable lesson, which helped him later in life. We are never really lost when we keep in touch with our heavenly Father.

CRANKY THE COW

The hot and weary horsemen were as hungry as horses when they finally shut the gate on the motley mob of flustered cattle. It was obvious they were not used to being in a stockyard. They pushed and shoved each other, trying to find a way out.

Most of the riders were glad to get out of their saddles and stretch their legs. Four hours in the saddle was a bit much for most of them. But everyone brightened when they saw Old Jack's dining table, loaded with fresh bread and all the ingredients for sandwiches. What a feast! In no time, the table was bare and the men relaxed while the experienced stockmen entertained them with stories of famous horses, wild bulls and cranky cows.

All too soon it was time to head for the yard, where an exciting afternoon awaited them. Soon the fire was lit for branding and ropes were unrolled, ready for catching and tying up the young bulls and heifers. Bill was surprised at all the equipment being set out.

Everyone was keen to rope a Jersey–Hereford cross cow, who was upset about being separated from her young bull calf. She had sharp horns that stuck out in front of her. She had already charged one stockman, leaving him with a torn trouser leg. They named her Cranky and she was determined to live up to her name. She had everyone sitting on the top rail of the stockyard, defying anyone to come down to her level.

It was decided to rope her and keep her tied up while the men got on with the afternoon's tasks. Then, at the end of the day, Cranky would be dehorned and released to find her way back to the swamps and bushland that were her home.

It was a busy afternoon as the men worked at sorting the stock, branding, dehorning and fitting in a bit of rough riding. Then it was Cranky's turn to get the treatment. She kicked, bellowed and fought like the wild thing she was, until she was finally thrown and securely tied.

One strong man sat on her shoulder, another held her back, while Bill was told to sit on her rump. Bill sat with his back to the cow's head, as he hated watching the dehorning process. The men noticed that Bill was not concentrating on the job, so they decided to teach him a lesson.

As soon as the stockman had finished removing the dangerous horns and applying antiseptic tar, they quietly untied the rope that had tied Cranky's front legs and sneaked over to the yard rails. Once safely perched on the top rail, they called to Bill to untie the cow's back legs.

Bill got a shock when he realised he was alone in the middle of the yard, sitting on a bad tempered animal that was ready to explode.

"Come on, Bill," they yelled. "Untie the rope and run."

As Cranky began to struggle, Bill looked to see which was the closest escape route. He decided, since the cow was

facing one way, he had better run in the opposite direction. Unfortunately for Bill, there was a yard full of hens behind the stockyard at that end, with a two-metre (six-foot) high wire mesh fence. Time was not on Bill's side as he untied Cranky's back legs. Before the enraged cow could get to her feet, he was heading for the nearest fence.

Cranky was just as quick and was close on Bill's heels as he ran for the fence. All the men on the stockyard rails cheered him on as he broke speed records on his way to escape the raging, bellowing, crazed animal. At the foot of the fence, Bill made a superhuman leap to vault the stockyard rails and the chicken wire. As Bill left the ground, Cranky hit the middle rail of the stockyard with a loud "crack!" Poor Cranky staggered around, stunned from the impact. The rail was split, all the hens had fled and Bill was flat on his back in the muck.

The stockmen and their helpers nearly fell off their perch on the top rail of the stockyard with laughter at the funniest sight they had seen in years.

Poor Bill was a smelly mess as he returned to the yard, looking sheepish and feeling sorry for himself. Old Jack didn't hesitate to emphasise the lesson all wanted Bill to learn.

"It is important to concentrate on what you are doing. Your own life and the life of others may depend on you."

"You see, Bill," Old Jack pointed out, "we must be alert at all times, especially in a dangerous situation."

Bill never forgot that experience and neither did his friends.

THE NOISY BRIDGE

One day, Bill was busy doing his homework when he heard a shout from outside.

"Are you there, Bill?" It was their neighbour, Harry, who had a dairy farm nearby. He also bred piebald horses.

"Yes, I'm here," called out Bill. "I'm on my way."

Harry was on his favourite piebald mare, leading a young colt he had just broken in.

"Bill," said Harry, "I need your help. This young colt needs to be handled and ridden every day or he will forget all he has learned. Over the next few weeks, he needs to get a lot of good habits fixed in his mind. Now, I am too busy and I know you love riding, so how about you give Champ a rest and spend some time with this young colt?"

Wow! thought Bill, *This is great.*

"Sure thing, Harry," he replied. "I would be more than pleased to help with his training. He will be a lot of fun to ride. Thank you very much."

Soon, Bill was grooming and fussing over his new charge. Bill

kept the colt in the stockyard, where he had shelter in the cow bails. There was water and lucerne hay for the young horse to enjoy and he could talk to Champ through the fence.

As Bill and the young colt got used to each other, Bill rode him around the paddocks, then along the beach and onto the roadway to get him used to traffic. He rode him with his mates to help get the colt used to other horses and did some cattle work as well.

One day, Bill decided it was time to ride the colt into town. Bill felt it was time he got used to the sights and sounds of the busy streets, where there were shops and people. The colt was still nervous around cars and trucks, and would nearly jump out of his skin when a motorbike went past.

Bill enjoyed all the attention they received, as the colt pranced and danced about among the vehicles and people. Bill's mates who were in town that day were impressed. Many people wanted to pat the young horse and the horse riders among them were envious of Bill, being able to ride such a smart looking animal.

All was going well until they came to the "noisy bridge." On the edge of the main part of town, there was an old bridge that spanned a tidal creek. The planks had been laid across the bridge and, over the years, the timber had shrunk so the planks rattled noisily up and down on the bolts as the traffic crossed over.

Every time Bill would urge the colt to step onto the bridge, a car would come along. This caused the bridge to rattle and go "clunk, clunk, clunk," which scared the life out of the colt. Bill nearly fell off a couple of times as the young horse jumped and bucked at the edge of the road.

Bill was struggling to hold him, as the young horse wanted to get as far away from the bridge as possible. But this was a

contest and the colt mustn't get his own way. This would not be a good habit. Bill knew that he had to help the horse learn there was nothing to fear. He had a fight on his hands.

The colt sniffed the planks, snorted and swung away each time Bill tried to persuade him to cross. There seemed to be a lot more cars than usual that day, so the colt was not a bit interested in crossing over the "noisy bridge."

As Bill struggled with the terrified horse, a small crowd of people began to gather to watch the contest between the young man and the young horse. Embarrassment only added to Bill's frustration as he did his best to encourage the horse to move onto the bridge.

At this point in time, things began to get nasty. Bill got angry. He steered the horse over to a bushy tree and snapped off a small branch, which he used to slap the colt on the rump. This only upset the horse more, causing him to give a few bucks that nearly unseated Bill.

While all this was going on, an old man who had been watching the drama stepped forward and spoke to Bill.

"Hey young fella, let me show you how to get that horse over the bridge," he offered.

Bill was struggling with his anger and now his pride was under attack. He was getting desperate. Maybe the old man could help.

"How?" retorted Bill.

"You just dismount," the old man said, "and I will teach you and your horse an important lesson."

Bill looked around at the ever-increasing crowd, then slowly got down, handing the reins to the old man.

Bill expected him to hop into the saddle and do something miraculous but he just stood there, patting the horse's neck and talking to him. Then, when the road was clear, he led the

horse over the bridge. The colt started gingerly over the noisy planks and nearly trod on the old man's heels but he walked across like a pet sheep. Then the old man led the horse back again.

The crowd clapped as the old man handed the reins back to Bill and said, "OK, it's your turn now."

Bill led the colt over and back, then the old man instructed him to mount up and ride the horse over. This time, it was easy. After a few more times, Bill was able to ride him over, even when cars were crossing at the same time.

As the old man was leaving, he paused and shared a thought for Bill to ponder. "You know lad, God is like that. He never forces us to do anything. He just leads and invites us to follow."

There were some good lessons learned that day for both horse and rider.

THE WATERMELON PATCH

One hot, sunny day, Bill and three of his mates decided to go on a long ride on their horses. With a bottle of water and lunch in their saddle bags, they set off for a fun day out in the bush, followed by a long ride along Seven Mile Beach.

They played a few games, explored a patch of bush they had never entered before, chased some wild cattle and played hide-and-seek. Around 10 am, they were feeling like a break so they searched for a shady place, with grass for the horses and a log or two to lean against.

As soon as they got off their horses, they began to think about the food in their saddlebags. In a short time, they had finished the water and their lunch. They knew they faced a long day without food or water but were determined to ride on until they came to the beach. They planned to head back into town by another route.

They had ridden a long way when they finally slid down

the sandhills and onto the deserted beach. The hot and weary boys quickly unsaddled their horses and rode them into the surf. All four horses and riders enjoyed the cool salt water. The boys enjoyed the waves and the challenge of staying on their wet, slippery horses.

Then it was time to gallop bareback along the beach. There were some spills and thrills but a lot of fun. By now the sun was right above, reminding them they were very thirsty. The boys and the horses were feeling tired and hungry, so it was decided to head home.

About 9 kilometres (six miles) down the beach, the boys found a fisherman's track leading from the beach into the bush. They decided to explore this new track and, after a short distance, came to a fence. On the other side was a market garden. The boys stared in amazement. They had no idea that such a thing existed.

What grabbed their attention was a patch of big, fat, dark-green watermelons. What a sight for the hungry and thirsty boys!

"Wow!" exclaimed the boys. "Don't they look good?"

"They won't miss one, will they?" asked Ron.

"Not likely," replied Tom, as he started to dismount.

The five-strand barbed-wire fence proved quite a challenge but a torn shirt was a fair trade, considering the reward. They chose the biggest melon they could find and, with much effort, rolled it under the fence. It took two of the boys to carry it into the bush, where they and their horses shared the feast.

The ride back to town took no time at all, as they were refreshed and satisfied. They said their goodbyes at the big fig tree and rode off to their homes.

The story might have ended there but for an unexpected turn of events. The next day, the man who owned the market

garden and his young assistant drove out to their "secret patch," to pick the fruit and vegies that were ready for market.

After a short time, the gardener's assistant needed to go to the toilet. He headed through the unlocked gate and into the bush. A few minutes later, the gardener heard a shout coming from the direction in which the boy had gone. He was startled to see the boy running toward him, holding up what appeared to be a large piece of watermelon skin.

It soon became clear that some horse riders had visited the garden and eaten one of their prize melons. The market gardener was upset and determined to find out who had raided his garden.

A couple of days later, Bill and his mates were enjoying an ice-cream in the local cafe when a mate came over with some bad news, "You guys had better watch out. Old Sid the fruit and veggie man is on your trail. He is even threatening to go to the Police. I'd go and own up if I were you."

"What do you think, fellows ?" asked a frightened Tom.

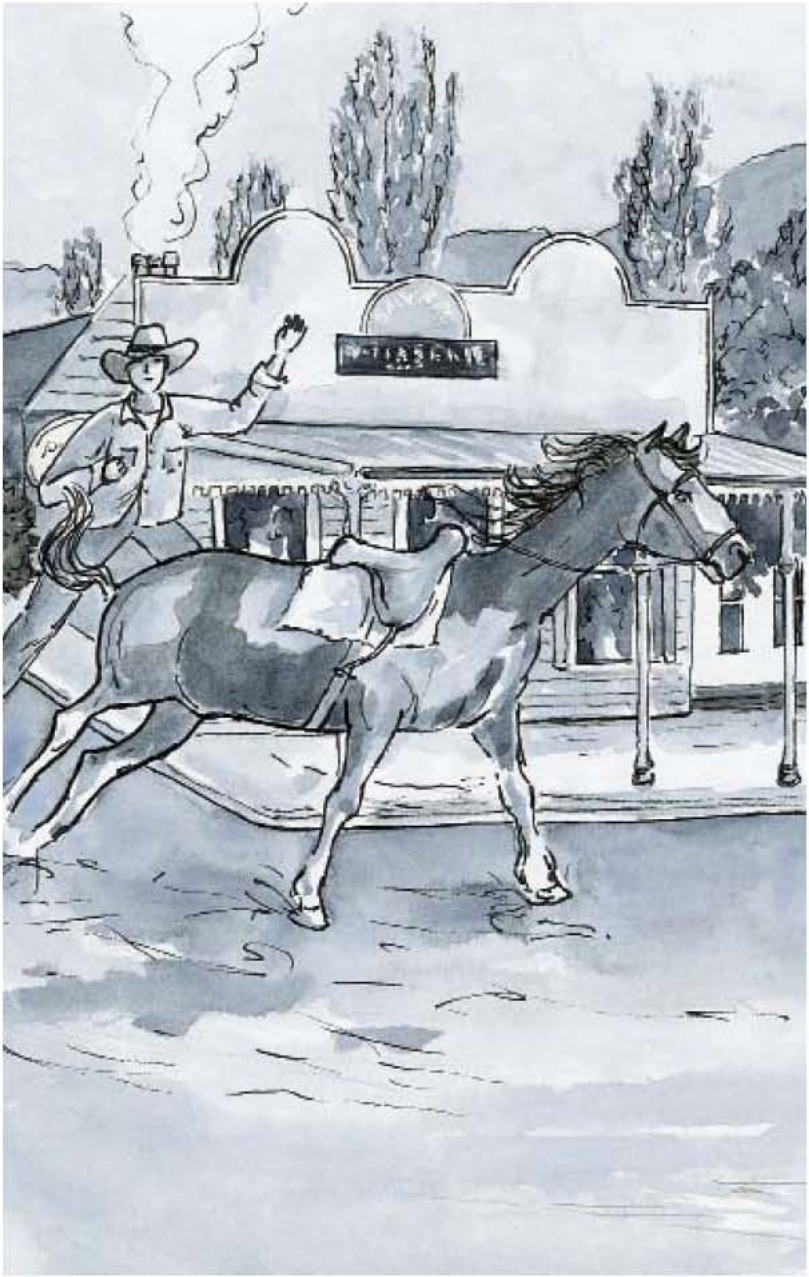
"We haven't much choice," replied Ron. "We will have to go and confess."

"He might get angry," stammered Ted.

"He can't do very much," commented Bill. "It was only one watermelon, after all."

So that afternoon, the four boys paid a visit to the fruit and vegetable man at his shop. After hearing their story and considering their offer to pay for the watermelon, the man decided to let them off with a caution. He even offered them some work weeding his garden.

The boys agreed they should have gone to the man before they were found out. As Ron said, "Dishonest people are always caught out eventually."



SHOWING OFF

A few days after the noisy bridge experience, Bill's mum asked him to ride down to the post office and collect the mail. Bill was keen to show off his new saddlebag. He had saved up for months to get it and this would be its first use.

Bill was in a chirpy mood as he rode along, singing his favourite songs. It was a fine, sunny day and the frisky young horse was in a mischievous mood, warning Bill to be on his guard.

The little town of Forster was now a big town, as it was holiday time and there were tourists everywhere. When Bill reined in outside the post office, he was surprised at the number of people milling around. He was glad he had groomed the horse and polished his saddle. He was also pleased when people noticed his new saddlebag.

While Bill was inside getting the mail, the piebald colt was receiving a good deal of attention. He was a handsome horse, young and frisky, pawing the ground and fidgeting about in his unfamiliar surroundings. He had big patches of black and

white, with a black-and-white tail.

When Bill walked out of the post office, he was surprised to find a small crowd of curious onlookers. Bill was suddenly seized with the temptation to show what he and the horse could do. He planned to make a giant leap into the saddle and gallop off down the road.

The onlookers watched as Bill untied the horse, pulled the reins over its head and leapt into the saddle. Unfortunately for Bill, the horse was more anxious to get going than he realised. Before he could get his feet into the stirrups or settle into the saddle, the horse made a quick left-hand turn, sending Bill flying straight over the horse, headlong into the gravel against the fence.

The horse went for his life up the road, heading for home. The small crowd of onlookers thought the incident was the best entertainment they had enjoyed in a long time. One man even added to Bill's embarrassment by helping him stand up, brushing off the dirt. Bill did not see the funny side of the event at all and made a hasty retreat.

Bill's mum was worried when the horse arrived home before Bill. It was not too long before she saw him limping along, trying not to hear when people called out, "Hey Bill, where's your horse?"

On hearing his story, Bill's mum had to remind him nothing good comes from showing off. She also said something about pride but Bill was busy getting out of hearing range!

LANDING IN THE BLACKBERRY BUSH

When Bill's neighbour handed the piebald colt over for Bill to look after and train, he laid down some rules. "Keep a careful watch over this young horse, Bill. Keep him well groomed, don't overwork him and don't race him. It would not be good if the colt wanted to gallop whenever he was with other horses."

"Don't worry," promised Bill. "I will take good care of him,"

Bill was so pleased to have the young horse to ride around, he was not likely to do anything to upset the plan.

Then one day, Bill and some of his mates were asked to round up a mob of stray cattle. They had wandered off into a tea-tree swamp, a long way from their paddock. The farmer was too busy to search for them, so he offered the boys some pocket money if they would go out and find the wandering cows.

It took most of the day to yard the cattle, pick up their pay

and head for home. For some strange reason, the colt was feeling lively and kept trying to run, even though he was near the end of a busy day. The young horse had enjoyed running down the cattle and wanted more action. As the riders got closer to town, they came to a track that had a long straight stretch before it turned onto the main road.

"Hey Bill!" called one of his mates. "Why don't we have a race?"

"Yes, come on, Bill," another boy pestered. "Let him have his head. We want to see what he can do."

"No," said Bill, "I promised I wouldn't race him."

"I think he is scared of falling off," teased one boy.

"Yeah!" said another. "Maybe Bill won't be able to pull him up."

"He just doesn't want to come last," teased a third boy.

All the boys had a good laugh at Bill's expense and he realised they were a little jealous of him being asked to train such a special horse.

But all these taunts stung Bill, who knew the piebald could outrun the other horses with ease. Here was the chance to prove the colt was the fastest horse in the district. So, in spite of his promise, Bill weakened and agreed to a race.

They knew one of the horses was a bit slow, so only three of them lined up ready for the signal to begin the race. At the crack of the whip, they were off. The three horses galloped side-by-side down the track at top speed. A few yards down the track, the colt began to take the lead and was soon out in front. The riders realised the colt was by far the fastest of the horses, so they decided to pull up before they reached the bend in the track.

When Bill tried to rein in the colt, he refused to respond. He was enjoying himself. He was stretched out, going as fast as

he could. It was a new and exciting experience for the young horse and he wanted to keep going. Bill pulled on the reins with all his might but the young horse had the bit between his teeth and was in control. The piebald had bolted.

Bill knew the track would soon meet up with a busy road and he did not fancy colliding with a truck. Somehow, he had to stop the colt. As Bill was racking his brains for an answer, he remembered some advice an old drover had given him.

"If a horse bolts on yer, Bill," the old timer had instructed. "Just lean forward and put yer hands over his eyes. That will stop him." Bill was desperate. He was ready to try anything. So, with much difficulty, Bill leaned forward and managed to cover the colt's eyes with his hands. The horse didn't stop. He just changed direction and plunged straight into a huge blackberry thicket.

The horse fell over as his legs became tangled in the prickly mass, throwing Bill further into the centre of the thicket. What a disaster the race had turned into!

Bill's mates rescued the colt but it was not so easy to reach Bill. He lay on his back, in great pain from all the blackberry thorns. He was too frightened to move and was pleading for help. The boys finally found some fence posts, which they threw into the thicket until a pathway was formed to where he lay. With much moaning and tearing of clothing, they helped Bill to his feet and out onto the track.

Bill was cut and bleeding, his clothes were torn and he was very much the worse for wear. But worst of all was the state of the colt. How could Bill face the horse's owner? It was too much! They all agreed, wrongly or rightly, this bad experience must be kept a secret.

Bill rode quietly home and quickly got busy with special ointments and bandages to help the colt recover from his

injuries. Fortunately, none of them were too serious. Bill's mum helped, as she was quite knowledgeable in treating cuts and sores. She also made sure Bill did not miss the object lesson she felt he needed to learn from his foolish actions.

"A promise is a promise," she declared. "Never break a promise. Mark my word, there will always be trouble if you do."

THE BIG SWIM

The exciting news was the talk of the town. Next Sunday, every rider and his horse would take part in the annual round-up on Big Island.

Every year, a large herd of cattle was rounded up and moved back to the mainland. The young stock would be herded into a holding paddock and the breeding cattle would be taken back to the island. The event always attracted a great deal of attention. It was a full day of fun, hard work, sweat and some risks.

Between Big Island and the mainland there was a smaller island, so there would be four swims before the day was over. This meant an early start.

Soon after sunrise, the horsemen lined the beach, ready for the day's adventure. The first step was to load all the saddles and gear into the rowboats. Then, with a lot of shouting and whip cracking, the horses were persuaded to plunge into the water. Once this was accomplished, four horses were allotted to each dinghy, led by a man sitting in the stern. The rower

had quite a challenge to pull the load.

A small launch followed the armada, in which a man was standing with a rifle at the ready in case any sharks showed up looking for breakfast.

Everyone was glad for a rest and some refreshment when they arrived on the first island. The men and boys relaxed and told yarns while the boats were rowed around the other side, ready for the longer swim to Big Island.

The horses all behaved well on the second swim and everyone arrived safely. Now the real work began. The stockmen knew they were in for some excitement, as the cattle had been left on their own for a whole year. Some of the young bulls and heifers had never seen horses, let alone humans.

As expected, chasing the cattle out of the bush and onto the beach was a lot of hard work.

"How will we ever force these wild animals to get into the water?" Bill wanted to know.

The owner of the herd grinned and shared his secret. "You see that old cow with the big horns over there? She is more than 10 years old. I keep her because she is vital to this whole exercise. She is the leader of the herd and all the other cattle follow her every move. When she goes for a drink, they all go for a drink. When she stops for a rest, the others do the same. Now when she goes into the water, they will follow."

To prove his point, the farmer rode into the mob, singled out the old cow, threw a rope over her horns and led her down to the water's edge.

"Are you all ready for another swim?" he shouted.

"Yes," they all replied. "Let's go."

"Good!" he laughed. "Round them up and move them out."

The first boat towed the old cow, while all the riders cracked their stockwhips and shouted, driving the frightened herd

into the water. As soon as the animals were all swimming, the men quickly unsaddled and loaded the remaining boats.

The horses seemed pleased to be back in the water after their busy morning chasing the obstinate cattle. They also had a rest while the men controlled the cattle on foot, waiting for the boats to complete their trip to the other side of the small island. How glad they all were for the calming influence of the old cow.

The rest of the day was spent separating the calves from the cows, branding and all the other things that stockmen do to cattle. The herd would rest up for a week and then be returned to their quiet island retreat.

Another exciting day awaited them when it was time to return the breeding cattle to their island paradise. For Bill, it could not come soon enough. As he rode his tired horse home, he reflected on the events of the day. He decided it had been the most exciting day of his life. He thought about the old cow and how the other cows trusted her. Some had never been in the water before, yet they followed her into the unknown. How important it is, he thought, to be a leader others can trust.

THE BONDI SURFER

It was a hot summer day—too hot for riding horses—so Bill and his mates decided to head for the beach. No-one knew about skin cancer in those days. It was always a competition to see who could get brown the quickest and they didn't even wear hats!

These were wonderful, carefree days as the boys surfed and sunbaked. They were also entertained by the influx of tourists, who fled the cities to enjoy the peaceful town—a popular holiday destination every summer.

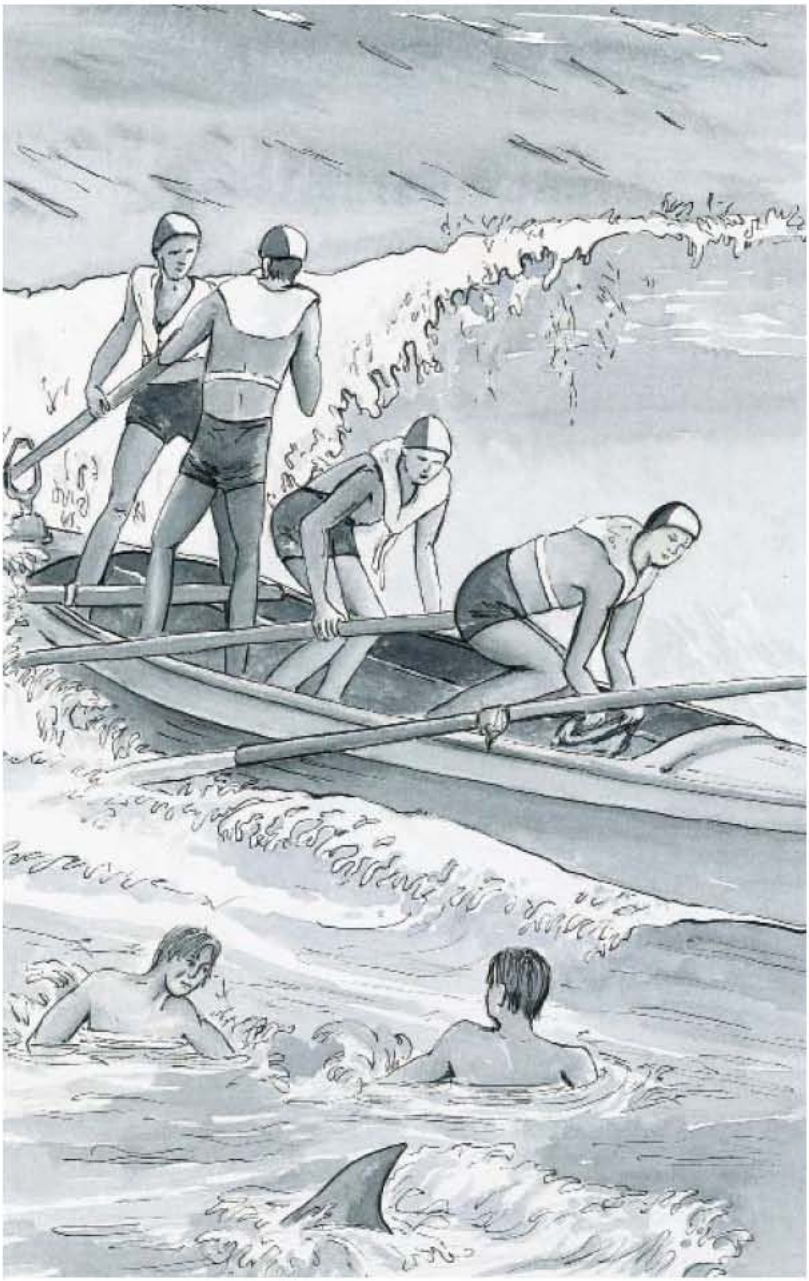
The surf was big that day and, after two hours, the boys were exhausted. As they relaxed on their towels, chatting and eyeing off the visitors, they noticed two well-built lads strolling along the beach. As they came close, one of Bill's mates called out a greeting and they wandered over.

"Are you locals?" the bigger of the two asked.

"Yes, we are," all four boys replied.

"So you think you are pretty good surfers, eh?"

"Sure," said Bill. "We can keep up with the best of them."



"Is that so?" chided the smaller boy. "Well, let me tell you something. Me and my mate here are from Bondi, where all the best surfers come from."

Bill's mate Tom couldn't resist a dig, "Where's that? I never heard of a place called Bondi."*

"That's not surprising," sneered the bigger boy. "Anyway, you just watch us and you might learn something." With that, they threw down their towels and did a running dive into the surf.

The boys sat up to see just how good the visitors were. They soon realised the two Bondi boys were experienced surfers. They were given a few pointers as the boys came roaring in to the beach on the biggest waves. They swam a long way out and caught the occasional big waves the locals left alone. The local boys preferred the breaks closer to the shore.

After a big ride that brought them right up to the edge of the water, the Bondi surfers walked up to the local boys, looking pleased. The bigger boy folded his muscly arms and grinned at them, as though they were his students.

"Well now, how about that for a demo?" he boasted.

"Not bad at all," the boys responded. "But you are taking a risk going out so far. We get regular visits from sharks this time of year and you can't hear the alarm when you're so far out."

"Oh! So the locals are frightened of the sharks, are they? Well, we have bigger and more dangerous sharks at Bondi than you've ever seen." And before the boys could tell them any shark attack stories, the two boys were back in the water, swimming out to where the big waves were.

It was time for Bill and his mates to go in for another swim, so they ran and dived into the surf, swimming out to where they felt safe. There were plenty of good waves and all the excitement, they forgot about the boys out the back.

Suddenly, their attention changed from waves to sharks as the alarm sounded. There was a stampede as everyone charged for the beach. The water was cleared in minutes, except for the two Bondi boys, who were too far out to hear the alarm.

The beach patrol quickly launched the surf boat and headed into the waves. They hoped to rescue the boys before the shark found them. Unfortunately, some big waves slowed their progress.

While all the drama was going on, the two boys were happily floating on their backs, waiting for that special wave. They had not heard the alarm and were anxious to catch a big wave in order to make a good impression as they came roaring through the swimmers, all the way to the sand.

A large wave began to form and the boys looked up to make sure the way was clear. It was then they saw the beach was lined with people. Their hearts froze—no-one was in the water! Frantically, they looked around for the shark. Then they saw the surf boat, struggling through the waves in their direction.

The boys fought the temptation to swim for it, knowing their actions would attract the shark's attention. So they decided to remain quiet and wait to be rescued. Unknown to the boys, the shark had been circling them for some time, and attacked suddenly from below. With one bite, it took the proud surfer's leg off just above the knee.

His brave mate swam over and held him up with one hand, while holding the stump of his leg with the other. The water was red from all the blood when the surf boat arrived. The boys were quickly pulled from the water and rushed back to shore.

An ambulance had been called and soon the boys were on their way to the hospital. Apart from a report of the tragedy

in the local newspaper, the locals never heard what happened to the Bondi surfers.

A year later, when Bill and his mates were enjoying another day at the beach, they learned how the story ended. They had just staggered up the beach to collapse on their towels after fighting a rough sea, when a strange figure stood before them.

It was a very hot day but this young lad was wearing long trousers. He seemed strangely familiar but it was his smile that held their attention.

"Hi! Do you remember me?" he asked. "Remember the Bondi surfer?"

"Sure do!" the boys replied. "We wondered what happened to you. It is good to see you came through."

"Only just," he muttered. "Now I have a permanent reminder of my stupidity." Then he lifted his left trouser leg, revealing his wooden leg underneath. "I can't surf anymore, play football or even tennis. It hurts to walk very far and it's all because I refused to take notice of your warning."

The boys tried to encourage him and as he was leaving, he left them with a comment they never forgot.

"Make sure you listen to the warnings you get along the way. It could save you a lot of pain."

BULLY THE BULL

One of Bill's chores was bringing in his dad's little herd of cows each evening. There were six milking cows, some young bulls, three or four heifers and Bully the Bull. Milking the cattle was his dad's hobby, and it kept the family in fresh milk and cream.

Sometimes Bill rode his horse to bring in the cows. They spent their days grazing in a large paddock on the other side of a big block of bush. Once rounded up, they would head for a narrow track that wound its way through the bush. There were also times when Bill walked to the paddock, accompanied by his dogs. They loved the bush walks, as there were always wild things to chase.

The worst feature of the exercise was persuading Bully the Bull to leave the grassy paddock and walk through the bush. He was very lazy and hated the half-hour walk. But Bill's dad insisted the bull must stay with the little herd overnight and share the dry feed they were given after milking each evening.

Late one afternoon, Bill was in a hurry, so to save time he

ran through the bush and quickly rounded up the cows for the walk home. Bully was in the far corner of the paddock, so Bill sent the dogs after him.

Bully hated the dogs and set to work to make his feelings known. While Bill hurried the cows onto the bush track, there was a great ruckus* going on in the corner of the paddock. He knew the cows would find their own way home once they were on the track, so he turned back and ran over to where four dogs and one bull were trying to sort out who was boss.

Bill called the dogs off and tried to head the angry bull in the direction of the track. Bully made it clear that he was not in the mood to be pushed around. When Bill tried to make him move, Bully refused to budge. Bill tried everything. He even picked up a strong stick and gave him a few whacks on the rear end. But nothing would move the stubborn animal.

Bill tried all kinds of tricks to encourage the bull to follow the herd but he refused to move. Sad to say, Bill lost his temper. He called the bull some names the bull had not heard before. He pushed, pulled, twisted and sought the help of the dogs but nothing happened. Bully seemed to be made of stone.

By now, the cows had reached the yard and were being milked. Bill was desperate. He wanted to be somewhere else. At last, feeling exasperated, Bill gave up and headed home.

Bill angrily explained his frustration to his dad, who calmed him down and predicted that the bull would come home on his own. Next morning the bull was standing outside the gate, waiting for his dry feed. He looked at Bill as though nothing had happened but he stared at the dogs as if to say, "Don't you ever come near me or there will be trouble."

Bill's mum was happy to point out that it is better to walk away from some situations before we get angry, then sort things out when we have calmed down.

THE BORROWED HORSE

Bill and some mates were in their favourite cafe, eating ice-cream covered in chocolate sauce. They were discussing the big round-up of wild cattle that would happen the following Sunday. They were excited about the fun they would have.

"It's going to be a big day," fretted Ron. "I sure wish I could be there but I can't come."

"Why not?" asked Bill. "You always go on these round-ups."

"Yes, I know but my horse is lame," moaned Ron.

"What about borrowing one of Bert's riding school horses," suggested Rex, who was always full of ideas.

Old Bert's horses had quite a reputation. They roamed all over town, knocking over garbage bins, jumping fences to munch on vegetable gardens, leaning over fences to chomp on flowers and generally being a public nuisance. They were not good stock horses either but maybe this would be a way to solve Ron's problem.

Nothing more was said on the matter, so it was a surprise

to Bill and his mates when Ron rode up to the group at the old fig tree on one of Bert's best horses.

"How much is he charging you for a full day?" questioned Rex.

"Don't ask," responded Ron, so nobody did.

It was a long, hard day. Someone was chased by an angry bull, some cattle ran away and hid in a patch of thick bush, two riders fell off their horses and a horse went lame. Everyone was glad to get home without injury.

Ron was so tired that evening he unsaddled the exhausted horse and let him find his own way home. Unfortunately, he neglected to hose the horse down.

The next morning, Old Bert went out as usual to fuss about his stockyard. When he opened the gate to let the horses in for their hay, he noticed his favourite chestnut was all dirty and caked with sweat.

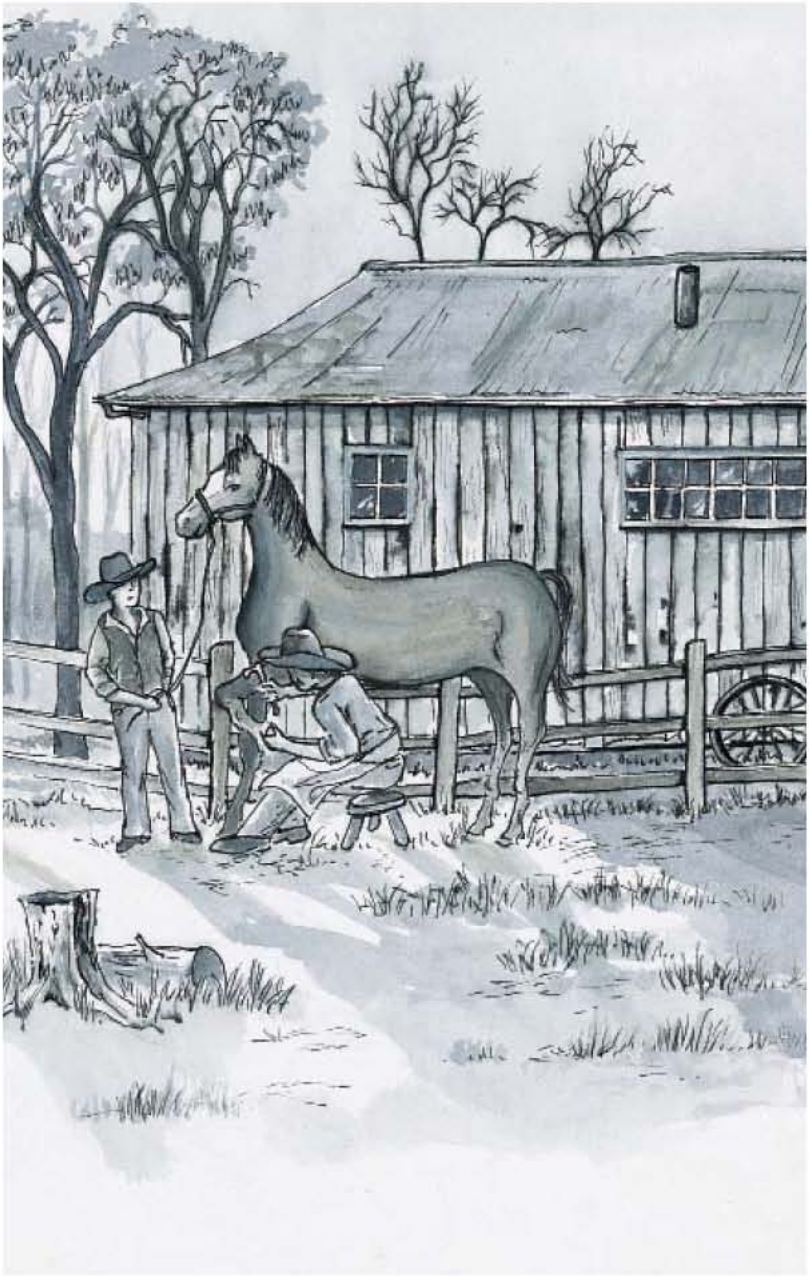
"I wonder who has been riding you around," he remarked to himself as he inspected his horse more closely.

The problem was, the horse was not used to a hard day chasing cattle. He looked ready to drop. Bert was quite angry and determined to find out who had given his horse such a hard time.

It was easy to discover there had been a round-up the day before. He also knew most of the boys who rode horses. Being crafty, he thought up a plan to force the culprit out of hiding.

Bert spread around a story that he was going to ask the police to find the person who had taken his horse and have him charged with horse stealing. Horse theft has always been a serious crime. So the story caused quite a stir.

Once again, the boys were in their favourite cafe, eating ice-cream covered with chocolate sauce, when the waitress spoiled their pleasure. "Have you heard the news?" she whispered.



"What news?" the boys enquired.

"Old Bert is looking for a horse thief. He says he will have him charged when the police catch him," she said. "It sounds a bit scary to me."

The boys sat in silence as they took it all in. Then Tom turned to Ron and asked, "Did you just take Bert's horse without asking?"

"Well," stammered Ron, "I saw the horse on the edge of town, eating someone's garbage, so I caught him and put him in our backyard for the night. I didn't think anyone would find out."

"Did you wash him down after you rode him home?" questioned Bill.

"No," defended Ron, "I was too tired and it was getting late."

"There is only one thing you can do," insisted Rex. "You have to go to Old Bert and confess."

"But what if he marches me straight down to the police station?" worried Ron.

Bill suggested the old man would not want to lose face in the community by being so tough. He would most likely let Ron off with a warning.

Tom, who liked to tease whenever he got the chance, suggested Bert would probably force him to shovel horse manure for a week.

They had a good laugh and then decided they would all go and face the old man, backing Ron up as he confessed.

Bert was busy shoeing one of his horses when the group of boys arrived at his stockyard.

"Well," demanded old Bert, "what brings you boys to my yard? Do you want to hire a horse or are you looking for a job?

"Hi Bert!" greeted the boys nervously. "Ron wants to tell you a story."

Then Ron stepped forward and confessed that he was the one who had borrowed the chestnut. He explained why he took the horse and how sorry he was.

"Why didn't you just come and ask?" challenged Bert.

"Well Bert," Ron explained, "it was getting late and we live on the edge of town. I saw the horse wandering about, so I decided he would solve my problem."

"So your horse is lame, is he?" sympathised Bert. "How about exercising some of my lazy horses, so when they have to do a day's work, they won't look like the chestnut after you had ridden him?"

Everyone thought that was a great idea and thanked Bert for being so understanding.

"Well now, it is only because you owned up that I am letting you off so lightly," stated Bert. "The thing is, I need some help around here. How about some help on the weekends?"

"Sounds good to me," declared Ron. "I love working with horses."

"That's settled then," agreed Bert. "See you next weekend. And remember boys, always ask when you need help of some kind. Most people are willing to help."

DROWNED

One hot, lazy summer day when Bill was on holidays, he rode his horse to town, hoping to find some of his mates. As he rode along the main street, a man he knew called out to him.

"Bill, did you hear about the drowning?" the man asked.

"No," replied Bill, "who was it?"

"Some tourists got into trouble with a launch they hired. If you want the full story, go around to Brian's boatshed. It was one of his launches that was involved."

"OK," replied Bill. "Thanks for letting me know." He had to satisfy his curiosity, so he rode around to the boatshed. After tying up his horse, he went in search of Brian. He found the boatman working on a spare engine.

"Hi Brian," Bill greeted him. "How are you today?"

"Not good," grumbled Brian. "It's been a rough couple of days. Two people have drowned and I have lost a good boat."

"Oh no!" exclaimed Bill. "That sounds awful. How did that happen?"

"Well Bill, it's a lesson in stupidity. This tragedy should

never have happened. I explained how to start and stop the engine, told the people not to fish in the channel because the tide was going out and showed them where the good fishing spots were. After a couple of false starts, they finally got started and headed off toward the lake.

"The next thing I knew," he continued. "I had the police around asking questions. They informed me that two people had drowned and my boat sank. They accused me of carelessness and warned there would be more enquires. Later, I heard the full story from a tourist who had been fishing off the breakwater.

"There were five members in the family, all keen to catch a lot of fish," Brian explained. "They got the idea in their heads that the channel would be a better place to fish, so they turned right at the bridge instead of left and headed for the channel."

"They must be new to the lakes, and unsure of the tides and currents," suggested Bill.

"You are right, Bill," responded Brian. "They were not only inexperienced in handling boats but were also not good at taking advice. They chose a spot near the breakwater, where the current is very strong. A fisherman who was watching from the seawall saw them stop the engine and throw out the anchor. The outgoing tide was too strong for the anchor and soon they were heading for the bar. There was a big surf that day, which made things worse."

"Wow!" declared Bill. "What a disaster."

"Yes!" agreed Brian. "That's exactly what it turned out to be. The father of the family panicked. In his rush to get the motor started, he flooded the thing. There were a lot of people out there fishing that day, who yelled to forget the motor and use the oars. Sadly, they didn't know how to use them. By this time, the launch was heading for the bar with its terrified cargo.

"One brave man dived in off the breakwater in an attempt to reach them before disaster struck. It was chaos. Some people ran for help and some shouted instructions. Some ran along the breakwater, trying to keep pace but not sure what to do, while others prepared for the worst.

"The swimmer reached the boat, just as it went side on to the first wave. The occupants were thrown into the swirling sea as the boat capsized. Two more rescuers swam out to try and save the struggling family but it was a tough call.

"The story gets a bit hazy at this point," reflected Brian. "But I understand the older boy managed to swim to safety. The mother and little girl were rescued but the father and small boy drowned."

"What happened to the boat?" Bill asked.

"It sank as it was pounded by the waves," moaned Brian. "I lost the lot and so did the tourists."

"It's a sad story," declared Bill. "Now there is a widow with two kids to bring up. They will wish they had never come on this holiday."

"Yes," said Brian. "A tragedy that shouldn't have happened. If only people would listen to instructions and do as they are told, what a lot of trouble they would be spared."

THE TIONA DRIVE

Once every two months, the local butcher invited as many horsemen as he could for a 20-kilometre (12-mile) ride to a place called Tiona. The butcher would meet a posse of cattlemen, who escorted a small mob of steers from their ranch up in the hills. The two groups of riders would meet somewhere on the road and guide the mob into a holding yard. While the cattle rested, the men ate their lunch and told yarns. Everyone enjoyed the adventure and looked forward to the fun day out.

Bill loved these cattle drives, as there was always excitement and unexpected adventure. He also enjoyed listening to the stories the cattlemen told of their round-ups, chasing brumbies and camping out in the bush. He wished he could live that kind of life.

This is the story of one day out that didn't go so well.

There were many uncertainties about this trip. The main one was that the cattlemen had warned the butcher the cattle were fat and flighty. They also warned that the steers had never

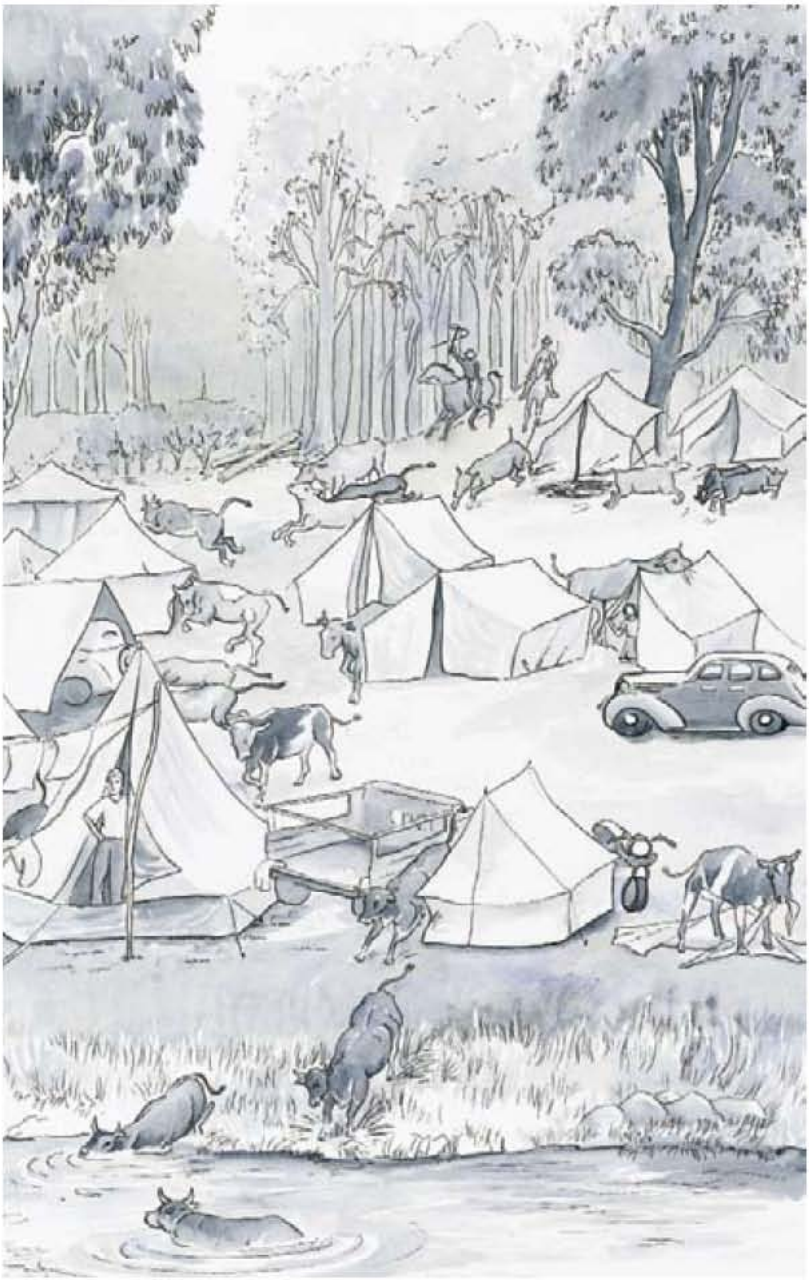
been out of their paddock. They had never seen or heard a vehicle of any kind. Another problem was the business of keeping them on the road, as there were no fences.

The biggest challenge of all was Tiona itself. At the narrow neck between the Wallis Lake and the ocean was a campground, spread out on either side of the road. This caravan park was a popular destination, especially during the school holidays. The tents were pitched right up to the edge of the road, with lots of people moving about.

On this day, the place was covered in tents and caravans. There was a lot of noise and activity. People were moving in and out of their tents, food was cooking, children were playing games and dogs were running about. Not the ideal place to drive a mob of nervous cattle.

The droving method was simple. There was always one rider out in front to give the cattle some direction. Then two riders or more on each side and the rest at the rear. Having already travelled for half a day, the steers were getting tired. The plan was to run the cattle through the narrow space between the tents as quickly as possible. The lead rider would call out, "Everyone be quiet, wild cattle on the move." Having already been warned, the people were usually as quiet as mice.

On this particular drive, Bill and his mate Tom were at the back, assisting the cattlemen. They were busy pushing the mob along with the help of the cattle dogs and the occasional crack of a stockwhip. The idea was to shout and whistle to keep the tired steers moving without causing panic. Everything was moving along nicely as they approached the camp, when Tom decided he would speed things up by giving a big troublesome steer a few good flicks with his whip. The restless animal tried to push his way through the mob to escape, starting a disturbance which led to a general panic.



He ignored Bill's warning that he might start something they would be unable to control. Bill was right.

The nervous beast spooked the mob and soon, all were stampeding. The stockmen tried to hold them back but their nervousness was driving them on. When the camp came into view, the sights and sounds caused the stampeding cattle to go into overdrive. As the mob rushed along between the tents, one steer got his horn caught in a tent rope and was quickly tangled in the collapsing tent. Soon there was utter confusion. Some people were climbing trees, while others ran around shouting. The steers went in all directions—overturning tables, collapsing tents, terrifying people, crashing into barbecues and doing their best to wreck the camp. There was total chaos as people and steers ran amok.

It took hours to round up the steers and get them into the holding yard. Back in Tiona, there was complete confusion as the campers retrieved their belongings and tried to pitch their damaged tents.

The butcher swore he could never show his face around the camp again and the cattlemen decided to dodge the camp on their way home by riding around the beach.

Tom was too scared to admit that he caused the upset but he and Bill learned a good lesson that day. The rest of the drive was uneventful as the steers were too tired to do anything but go where they were told. That evening, there was much laughter as Bill and his parents sat around the table, going over the day's events. No-one ever forgot that cattle drive—certainly not the campers.

THE FISHING TRAWLER

Sometimes, Bill would ride his bicycle into town to collect the mail or meet up with his mates. It was a cold winter day when he chose to give his horse a rest and use his bicycle. After collecting the mail, Bill headed for his favourite cafe where he knew some of his mates would be gathered. As they were eating their ice-cream floating in chocolate sauce, a breathless man rushed into the cafe and shouted, "There's been a shipwreck! You can see it from the breakwater."

Bill and his mates gobbled down the last of the ice-cream and were out the door as quick as a wink. They raced down the main street, through the caravan park and up onto the breakwater. There it was, a fishing trawler, upside down and being pounded by a huge surf.

"It must have missed the channel in the night," mused Tom.

"Could be," commented Bill. "But why is it so far along the beach?"

The boys were puzzled as they stared at the tragic sight

before them. Here was a mystery and Bill was determined to find out what had happened.

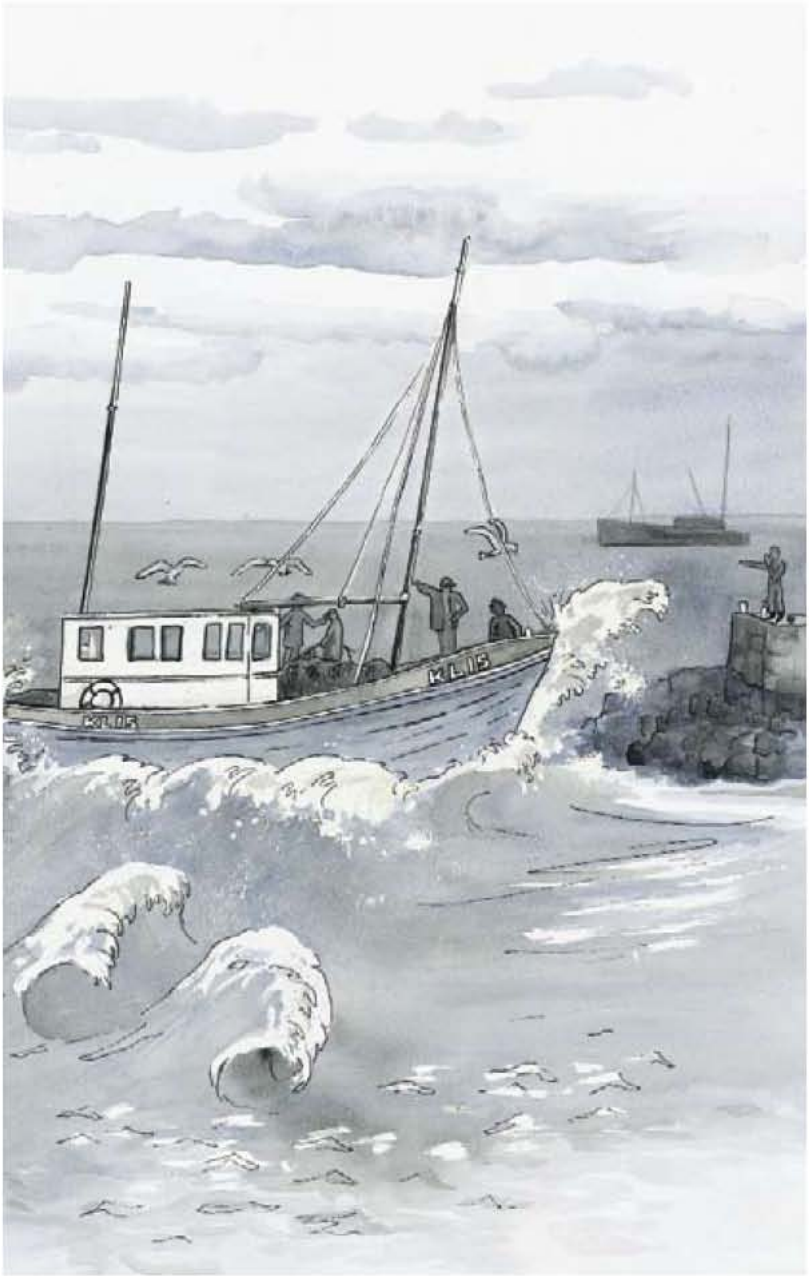
The local newspaper gave only a general outline of the events. Bill knew there was more to the story, so he asked around and soon put together the facts.

The fishing industry that employed a large number of local people in those days was centred on the north side of the channel, which is the mouth of the Wallace Lakes. The water was deeper there, so the wharf had been constructed on that side. In those days, the town of Tuncurry was a sleepy little village—the centre for ship building and fishing.

On the south side of the channel was a small hill, known as Pilot's Hill. The pilot's job was to keep the shipping up-to-date on the weather conditions. He gave reports on tidal movements and signalled the fleet of fishing boats by hoisting a black ball up or down a tall mast.

If the black ball was high on the mast, the captains knew it was not safe to approach the entrance to the channel. Many years ago, a ship had been wrecked on a sandbar just out from the entrance. Over the years, this obstacle had become a serious danger for fishing boats entering and leaving the channel. When the tide was low, it was too dangerous to go around the bar and manoeuvre into the channel. When conditions were unsafe, the fishing boats stayed out in the ocean, riding the waves until the pilot signalled for them to come in. He did this by lowering the black ball.

On this occasion, there was a new boat—the pride of the fleet. The captain, who had been a deckhand for some years, was now the proud owner of a new trawler. It had all the latest refrigeration equipment, fish-finding gear, new nylon nets, storage space and sleeping quarters. This boat could stay out to sea for three or fours days, and was the envy of all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the captains. All the trials had gone well and now the trawler was coming in with its first load of fish.

On board were the captain's son and a deckhand. All three had experienced some sea sickness and were tired from three hard days of battling a big sea. As they came in sight of the shore, they discovered a small fleet of trawlers riding the swell as they waited for the signal to enter the channel. The new boat would have to wait its turn, which meant quite a delay. The new captain was suddenly overcome with feelings of frustration, pride and greed. He thought to himself, *Here is an opportunity to demonstrate my ship-handling skills—and get to the wharf to unload my catch before the other boats.*

As he motored past the other boats, their captains signalled it was too dangerous to proceed. His deckhand protested and pleaded with him to wait. But he refused to listen and kept on course. He was faced with a very tricky manoeuvre. To get around the bar, he had to head in toward the beach, then, at the right moment, make a sharp left turn. This would put the boat sideways to the waves, so the captain could move between the bar and the end of the breakwater to reach the channel.

If the boat had been empty, the manoeuvre would have most likely succeeded—but it was heavily laden with tons of fish. What happened should never have occurred. The captain ignored his own inexperience, took no notice of his deckhand, refused to listen to his fellow captains and disobeyed the pilot's instructions. Bill found it hard to believe this new captain, who had worked and saved for so many years, would risk so much and even put his own son's life in danger.

The captain and crew of seven fishing boats watched in horror as the new trawler headed for disaster. As the boat headed toward the beach, before making its turn to sail

between the bar and the breakwater, a huge wave lifted the back of the boat out of the water. The captain lost control as the heavily laden boat surfed toward the shallow water. The front of the boat dug into the sand and, to the amazement of the onlookers, went end-over-end, crashing upside down and landing in the shallow water with a huge splash.

The force of the impact crushed the wheelhouse, killing the captain and throwing his son and the deckhand into the surf. The deckhand managed to get hold of the lad and struggle his way to dry land, where they lay exhausted on the beach. They stared with unbelieving eyes at the shiny new hull of what had been the pride of the fleet. There, wallowing in the angry surf, was the dashed hope of one family's prosperous future.

All the members of the fishing village shared the family's grief. The disaster was discussed and debated for years to follow. The story has now passed into history but Bill never forgot the tragic story of the disobedient sea captain.

TROUBLE ON THE ROAD

It was time to collect another mob of cattle for the abattoirs. It was hoped the caretaker at Tiona had forgotten the last trip, when the cattle ran wild among the tents. This time, there would be more horsemen and a strict set of rules.

The day was perfect. Not too hot, some cloud cover and a gentle breeze. The horses were fidgety, as they sensed something was going to happen. But they soon settled down as the morning wore on.

"Isn't it interesting," remarked Tom, "how the horses get excited when they all get together? It's as though they know they are in for a fun day chasing cattle."

"Yes," replied Rob, the head stockman. "They feel the atmosphere of anticipation just as we do. Let's hope for a hassle-free day, unlike the time when we nearly wrecked the holiday camp. It's good we are a bit earlier, we can spend some time warning the campers to keep quiet and stay out of

sight. We should get to Tiona by 10 am. We'll have a spell, water the horses and then ride to meet the mob."

"How far past Tiona will we meet the cattle?" asked Barry, who was on the ride for the first time.

"Should be an hour's ride, all going well," replied Rob.

There was quite a stir when the riders pulled up in front of the caretaker's office. Holiday-makers appeared from all directions to inspect the horsemen with their stockwhips, dogs and bulging saddlebags. It was a sight many had never seen before. They all listened intently as Rob rose in his saddle and spoke to the crowd.

"Good morning, campers," he shouted. "I have an announcement to make. In an hour or so, we will be escorting a mob of nervous cattle along this narrow road and we need your cooperation. These are not bush stock but fat Herefords out of their paddock for the first time, so they are easily spooked. When you hear the crack of the stockwhip, we would be grateful if you all kept very quiet and well away from the road. Thank you."

The caretaker promised to do his best to keep everything under control as the horsemen rode away to meet the mob. After a few miles, the road began to wind its way up into the hills and this slowed everyone down. They were all hoping to hear the noise of stockmen and cattle as they rounded each bend in the road.

It was more than an hour before they heard dogs barking and stockwhips cracking.

"Isn't that music to your ears?" cried Rob. "Let's find a shady place to rest while we wait."

After the usual greetings and an update on the morning's events, the cattle were persuaded to move again. They needed encouragement as they looked tired, hot and thirsty.

As they approached the camp from the northern end, Rob gave some orders.

"We need to string them out into a long line," he instructed. "They get all fidgety when they are bunched up. We need two men in front, three men on either side and the rest of us to stay behind. Just take it easy and pay attention. These Herefords are a bit tired, so we should get through without any drama."

And they did—not a problem. It was a relaxed group of men who sat around, chatting over a welcome lunch. The cattle and horses were glad for a drink and a rest.

"It looks as though we will have a trouble-free trip this time," remarked Rob, as he leant back against his saddle. "We hope you have an easy trip back, too," he said to the stockmen.

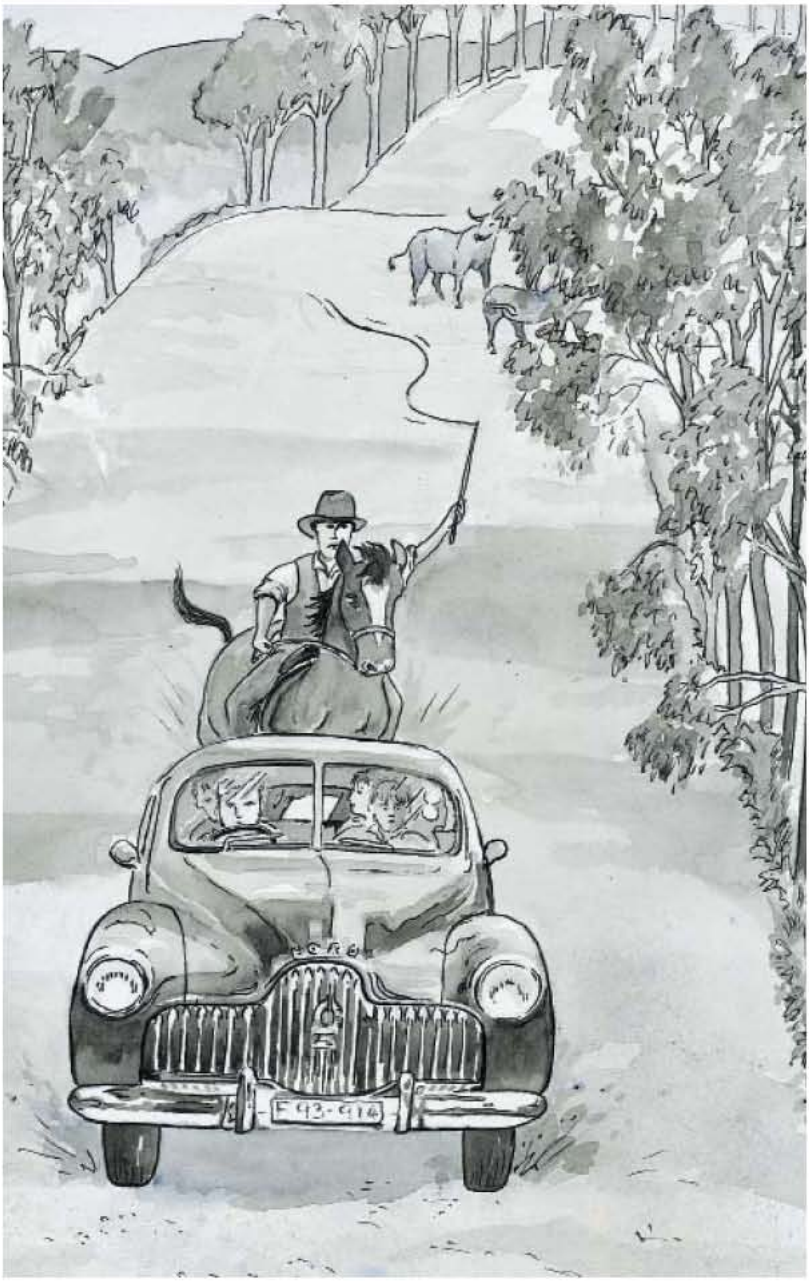
"Thanks, Rob," one of the cattlemen responded. "We should be home before nightfall after such an uneventful trip. We'll see you in two months time. Take it easy and give the cattle a rest every couple of hours. They are a bit fat due to the good season we've had."

It was a happy group of men who went their separate ways early that afternoon. But, it was not going to be as easy as Rob had hoped. About an hour down the road, disaster struck.

As the horsemen were heading the cattle along the unfenced road, an old car came up behind them. There were four lads out for a drive, looking for some fun in their noisy old Ford. Before the horsemen could move the cattle over to the side of the road, the lads began to shout and blow the car horn.

"Cut that out!" yelled Rob. "You'll scare the cattle and if we can't hold them, they will go in all directions. Just wait a minute and we will make way for you."

But the lads wanted some action and created a ruckus by



revving the engine, blowing the car horn and shouting. They also banged on the sides of the car to add to the din.

These noises were strange to the cattle. Although they were tired, they were soon upset and began to run. The horsemen tried to hold them but the louder the noise behind them became, the faster the cattle ran.

The lads ignored the appeals of the stockmen and kept up the racket. They had locked themselves in the car and couldn't be reached. They drove past the horsemen and finally stampeded the cattle, who took off into the thick scrub on both sides of the road. The horsemen were furious as they watched the cattle heading in all directions.

As the car sped away, Tom, who had a fast horse, chased them down the road, banging their car with his stockwhip. As hard as the lads tried, they could not outrun Tom's horse, because the road had a lot of potholes. As a result, the driver went home with quite a few marks on his car.

"What do we do now?" asked Bill, as the frustrated stockmen sat on their horses, watching the last of the cattle disappear into the bush.

"There isn't much we can do at this point in time," growled Rob. "We will have to let the cattle settle down and get back together. That could take all night, so we will have to come back in the morning. We might have to keep them off the road and push them through the scrub until we reach the fenced-off section of the road."

It was a dejected group of stockmen who rode into town that evening. After goodbyes were said, they headed for their homes, wondering what the new day had in store for them.

It did not take long for the story to get out and there were four unpopular lads in town, who kept well away from the stockmen.

NEW BOY IN TOWN

Hi Bill!" called Terry. "Have you met the new boy yet?"

"What new boy?" asked Bill, as he turned his horse in Terry's direction.

"There is a new bank manager in town," he continued. "He has moved up from Sydney with his family and his son is about our age. You ought to meet him, he is quite a character."

"We should invite him to join us for ice-cream," suggested Bill. "Tell him to meet up with us at the Corner Cafe tomorrow afternoon."

"Good idea," responded Terry. "He lives near our house, so I will call in and give him an invitation."

The next afternoon the new boy, Rex, joined the local boys at their favourite cafe, where they were enjoying their ice-cream floating in chocolate sauce.

"Hi guys, is this the worst of your habits?" questioned Rex, with a grin on his face.

"That's about it," replied Terry.

"Well," boasted Rex, "we get up to a lot of more exciting

things down in Sydney."

"We country boys are a contented lot," explained Tom. "We enjoy a simple life and like to keep out of mischief as much as we can. So, how about we shout you a dish of ice-cream and you tell us about life in the big city?"

Rex sat down in the cubicle with the boys and told them stories of his exploits in Sydney. Then, to their surprise, he took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket.

"You have your sugar and I'll have my nicotine," he joked. "I enjoy a couple of smokes each day but I have to watch that my dad doesn't catch me."

"That's not a good habit to get into," remarked Bill. "Tobacco will stunt your growth and damage your lungs. Besides, the girls won't like the smell of your breath."

"It hasn't hurt my dad, and he's been smoking for 25 years. Then there is my uncle and some of my mates down south. They don't have any problems. There is too much scaremongering about smoking being bad for your health," scoffed Rex. "Why don't you guys try one? Just one cigarette won't do you any harm, and then you will know if you like the taste or not."

"Your friends and relatives may be lucky, Rex," stated Tom. "But you should hear my grandfather in the mornings, trying to clear his lungs. It's a wonder he has any lungs left."

"Yes," agreed Ron. "You should hear our next door neighbour's cough. He came back from the war with his habit and he can't give it up, even though it's killing him. There is no way you could persuade me to try smoking, it's a fool's game. Fancy paying good money to harm your own body. It's crazy!"

Rex was starting to feel a little uncomfortable as his new friends resisted his invitation. But he was determined to keep

his habit. He secretly hoped he could persuade some of them to take up smoking, so he was not on his own.

The local boys had a habit of giving people nicknames. Rex became known as "the Smoking Gun." While they were happy for him to join their group, they made fun of him behind his back. They were determined to make him feel so uncomfortable in their presence that he would give up smoking before it got a grip on him.

For the next few months, the contest raged. Who would win? Would Rex turn Bill's group into a bunch of young smokers or would they stand their ground and make him feel isolated until he gave up?

It was one of the local girls who helped to win the battle. Betty was one of the prettiest girls in town. All the boys thought she was special but she treated them as friends. Rex thought he should be her special friend. She told him he didn't have a chance while he was smoking and that did the trick. It was a good outcome, as the boys could not claim victory and Rex had a good excuse.

It was a good result in many ways. None of Bill's mates ever took up smoking and they all built a reputation for healthy, honest living.

THE BUSH HORSE

Bill was excited. Some family friends, who lived on a big property, had invited him to spend his school holidays with them. There were two families living close to a huge forest, where some of the biggest trees in Australia were found. One tall tree had a fire lookout in its top branches.

Bill's friends raised cattle for a living. They also sold firewood, fruit from their orchard, vegetables from the garden and eggs from a motley flock of free-range hens. These people were almost self-supporting. They baked their own bread, churned their own butter and made their own jam, pickles, preserves and dried fruit.

Visiting their homes was like being in another world. It was a world that appealed to Bill. He could have stayed there forever.

When the two families worshipped together, they filled the little bush chapel. They were a happy, carefree group of simple, country people. When they played games, there were enough boys and girls to make up two teams. The older boys

were also keen horsemen and enjoyed taking Bill for rides in the huge forest.

On one of their outings, they came across a mob of horses. "Are they brumbies?" asked Bill.

"No!" chorused the boys. "They are just a bunch of nags that no-one rides anymore."

"You see that big bay gelding over there?" pointed one of the boys. "He is more than 16 hands and the strongest horse you have ever seen. He put his owner in hospital when he whacked him with his front hoof. He was let out to run free and never ridden since."

"We are all scared of him," added his brother. "He bucks and has thrown some of the best riders in these parts. One rider ended up with a broken leg and another with three broken ribs."

Bill learned the horse had not been ridden for two years and had the local riders beaten.

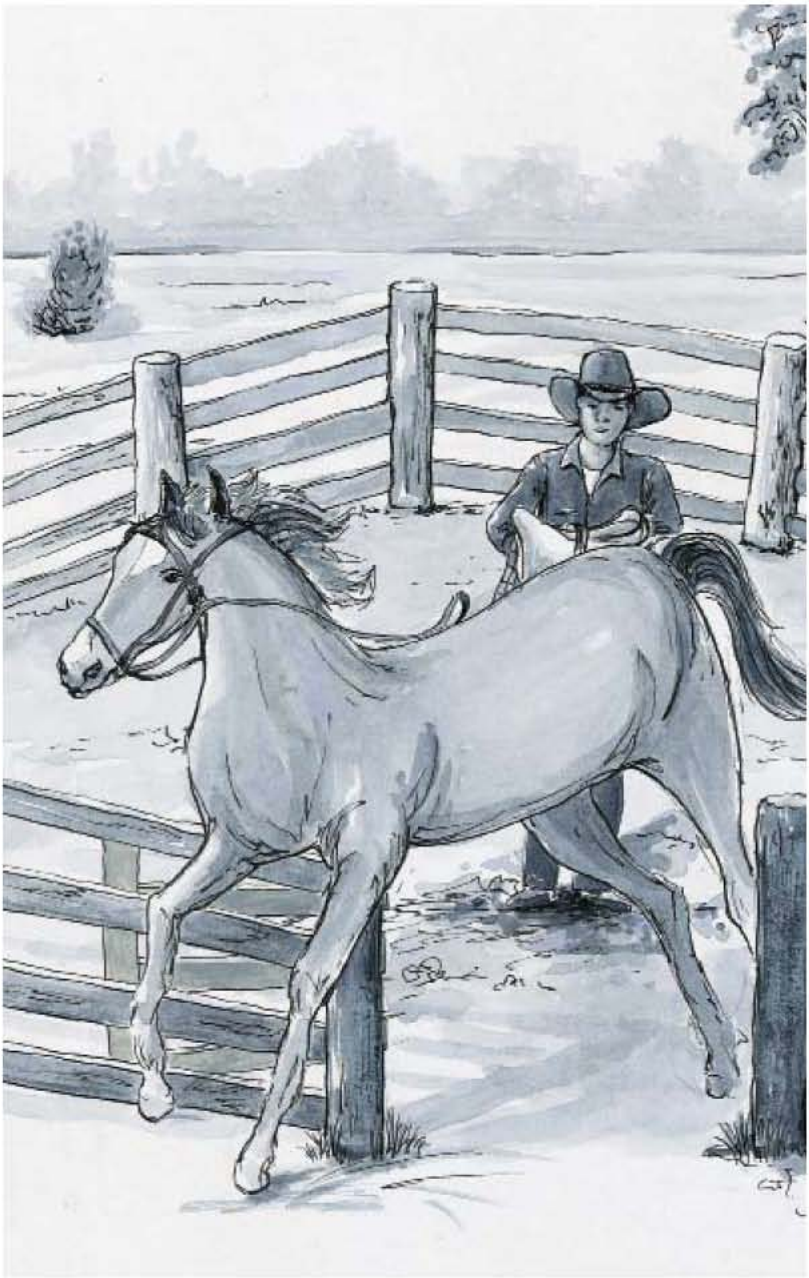
I would love to show these people that no-one has to be frightened of a horse, he thought. Suddenly, he blurted his thoughts out loud.

"I would like to have a go at riding your bush horse," he announced.

"Wow," shouted one of the younger boys. "That would be something, wouldn't it?"

It was decided that all the boys would saddle up and search for the wild horses the next day. When they found them, they would drive them into the stockyard by the homestead.

Early the next morning, a group of excited boys rode out into the forest in search of the horses. As the heat of the sun started to wilt their enthusiasm, they finally sighted the horses in a gully. They were standing around under shade trees, swishing flies with their tails.



It was decided to surprise them by making as much noise as possible, so the frightened and confused animals could be herded in the direction of the stockyard before they had time to think about an alternative.

The plan worked like a charm. After a fast and furious ride, the mob was soon safely shut in the yard. Once the bay horse was separated from the others, the fun could start.

The word had got around that Bill was going to attempt to ride the bay rogue. In no time, a collection of onlookers appeared. Everyone perched on the top rail of the yard, watching to see what would happen.

"Well, Bill, there he is," challenged the boys. "He's all yours. Here is the bridle and the saddle is by the gate. If you can catch him and ride him, you will make your mark around here. But remember, he is a wild horse and unpredictable."

"Watch his legs," warned one of the boys.

"Keep an eye on his ears, too," added another boy.

Bill was wondering what he had got himself into but there was no backing out now. Bill breathed a short prayer and walked slowly toward the big bay horse, who was standing his ground in the middle of the yard.

The horse ignored him as Bill came closer, talking softly while keeping the bridle out of sight as much as possible. There was not a sound to be heard. Even the birds were quiet. No-one spoke and the horses in the next yard were as still as statues. There was an air of expectation as Bill talked to the big horse and stroked its neck.

"Come on, be a good boy and let me get this bridle on your head," coaxed Bill.

It was quite an effort to get the bridle in place, as Bill had to stand on tiptoe. The whole time, he was watching for any threatening move from the horse. The next step was to lead

the horse over to the saddle.

Bill was relieved that everything was going smoothly so far. He carefully watched both ends of the horse as he set the saddle in place and tightened the girth. All went well. Now, it was time for the big test.

After leading the horse around the yard for a few minutes, Bill sprang into the saddle and waited for the horse to make the next move. Nothing happened so Bill rode him around the yard a few times, then invited the boys to get their horses and go for a ride.

There were mixed feelings as the audience walked away. Some had been hoping for a bucking and jumping show, while others were relieved no harm had come to Bill.

The boys had a wonderful ride through the forest. They walked and cantered their horses along the trails, enjoying the sights and sounds of the forest. The big bay behaved as though he was a regular stock horse, ridden every day.

The mistake was made when they returned to the yard. Bill forgot to not take the horse for granted. As he did with his own horse, Bill let the reins drop while he undid the saddle. He was in the process of removing it when the big bay took off. He shot through the open gate and was soon disappearing into the trees. The boys stood in shock as the big horse raced away, the bridle still on his head and the reins flying in the breeze.

"Don't worry," encouraged his friends. "He will scrape the bridle off on a tree branch or a fence post. It is a small price to pay for a successful event we will remember for a long time."

THE GUAVA TREE

When Bill felt like riding his horse the long way home, he would pass old man Rassmussen's house. Mr Rassmussen had built a high fence in front of his house to stop people helping themselves to his fruit trees. The old man had quite a large orchard, where he spent most of his time tending his beloved fruit trees. But he was mean, and kept all the fruit for himself and his family. It was common knowledge that a lot of fruit lay rotting on the ground.

Some of the trees hung over the fence but were too high to reach from ground level. This was not a problem for Bill, sitting on his horse. Somehow, Bill seemed to know when there was fruit available and, on this particular day, he knew the guava tree was loaded.

Bill had been chased away on many occasions, so he always approached the old man's place with caution. On this day, there was no-one around so he steered his horse close to the fence, right under the guava tree. The big yellow fruit was delicious and Bill stuffed himself until he could not fit

another guava into his bulging stomach.

He was just about to head for home when he remembered that his Mum loved guavas too, so he filled his shirt with as many of the biggest ones he could reach. Bill had to keep his horse at a steady pace on the way home. He was so full and did not want to squash the fruit in his shirt.

When he got home, he called for his mum to bring a container. Before he got off his horse, he emptied out his shirt into the large dish. Much to his mother's delight, the dish was full and overflowing with big, yellow guavas.

As soon as Bill had fed and watered his horse, he hurried to the house to find out how his mum was enjoying his gift. He was surprised to see a strange look on his mother's face.

In front of her was a plate with a big, fat guava cut in half and a teaspoon with a scoop of guava ready to be devoured. Bill wondered why his mum was not enjoying her feast.

"How closely did you look at the fruit before you ate it?" his mum asked.

Bill had to admit he had been keeping an eye out for the old man, so he had not paid attention to what he was eating.

"I was looking around at the same time as I was feasting," he admitted. "Why, what's wrong with the guavas?"

"They are full of worms. That's what's wrong," retorted his mum. "That means your stomach is full of wriggly little grubs, as well as guava. Next time, pay more attention to what you are eating. Why didn't you ask yourself why the tree was loaded with fruit, when you knew that Mr Rassmussen is such a mean old man?"

Bill did not feel like tea that night and did not appreciate his dad's hearty laughter when he heard the story. It was a family joke for years but Bill never told his mates about his guava experience.

THE NEW HORSE

Bill decided it was time to look for a new horse. He wanted an animal with better breeding and more spirit—a horse that would be smart around cattle and fast on its feet. He also wanted a good-looking animal that could compete with the other horses in the district.

He advertised in the local newspaper and spread the word around among his friends. Finally, a mate of his who lived about 50 kilometres (30 miles) away sent a message to say his family had a good stock horse they no longer needed.

It was decided that Bill would visit their farm for a weekend. He would have plenty of time to ride the horse to see if she suited his needs. So Bill went by bus to Taree, where his friends met him and drove him to their property.

The plan was for Bill to ride the horse around on Friday and give her a rest on Saturday. If Bill was interested, he could ride home on Sunday.

When they arrived at the farm, the farmer welcomed Bill and said, "Here is the bridle. You will find the mare up in

the back paddock. She is a quiet horse and easy to catch. Her name is Sox, as she has three white feet," explained the farmer. "I advise you to lead her back to the yard, where you can saddle her up and go for a good ride. She hasn't been ridden for months so she will sweat easily and you don't want to get your flash riding breaches all wet."

After quite a long walk, Bill found the mare under a tree at the far end of the paddock. She was quite a smart-looking mare. A bit fat but she had a nice smooth coat and he liked her colour. With a bit of coaxing, he fitted the bridle over her head, gave her a few pats and set off for the long walk back to the yard.

It was getting hot and Bill was feeling weary after the long uphill walk. "This is a silly game, walking a horse when you can ride," thought Bill. "Besides, I want to find out how she goes when she is ridden bareback."

So Bill leapt onto Sox's back and away they went. He soon found that the farmer's warning was true enough. By the time they arrived at the yard, his riding breaches were soaked with horse sweat. He was feeling a bit chafed too, as he didn't ride bareback often.

Bill had walked and trotted the mare on the way to the yard. He had also cantered her up and down, and round and round to test her skills. The exercise had made him a bit sore but once he had saddled up, he felt more comfortable.

The next morning, Bill had stiff muscles and was sore where he was chafed. But he was too proud to say anything. It proved to be a long, uncomfortable day. That night, he examined himself as best he could and found he was red and sore. The chafed area looked nasty. He realised he was in a predicament. He had to ride home the next day, whether he liked it or not.

On Sunday morning, Bill was so stiff and sore he almost

changed his mind—but he didn't want to admit he had ignored the farmer's advice and ridden bareback. After a hearty breakfast, he struggled into the saddle and set off with his mate, who had agreed to ride with him for the first leg of the journey home.

After his mate left, Bill dismounted and walked for a a while—but he was in real trouble. He was badly chafed and the horse's sweat had got into his blood stream, causing a painful infection. How he managed to get all the way home is a mystery but home never looked so good.

Over the next few days, Bill found himself with a crop of boils that made it impossible for him to sit, stand or walk. His mother was kept busy with dressings and poultices, which only added to Bill's discomfort. It was two weeks before he could walk around without moaning in pain and another week before he could ride his new horse.

Bill was tempted to rename the mare "Pain." This was because every time he rode Sox, he thought of the painful experience involved in her purchase.

Bill agreed with his mum that we cause ourselves a lot of pain when we ignore good advice.

PIANO LESSONS

Bill's mum was a piano teacher and it was her aim to teach Bill to play like a professional. Bill thought it was a good idea but he was not keen on spending hours practising scales and learning theory. There were too many more exciting things to do.

Nevertheless, a set time was agreed on and Bill endeavoured to keep the arrangement. Most of the time it went well but there were times when Bill felt more important things were going on. His mum did not want to be too tough, so she would let him off if he promised to make up lost time on another day.

Sometime this worked out and sometimes it didn't. However, Bill and his mum kept working and soon he was using two hands. Then Bill's mum became enthusiastic and suggested he increase his practice time from one to two hours each day.

Bill realised this would keep him from doing many things he enjoyed far more than practising the piano. He could see his horse getting fat and lazy. He could see his friends asking why he was not around so much. There was also a new

girlfriend who wanted a slice of his time.

But when he put his case to his mum, she was not sympathetic.

"Look here, Bill," she pleaded, "the day will come when you will forget all these interests you have but you will always be glad you learned to play the piano. You can't cart a horse around with you all your life but there will always be a piano and your talents will be appreciated."

"But," argued Bill, "how do I know that being a pianist will prove all that useful?"

"Well, it has for me," retorted his mum. "You will always be needed, as there is a shortage of pianists and it is a way for you to get involved and make a contribution. Besides, being able to play the piano will provide you with a hobby for the rest of your life."

Bill had to admit his mum was usually right, so it was back to the keyboard. He still found practising a real chore and found it difficult to keep his mind on the task at hand. He would sit at the piano, looking out of the window at his idle horse.

He would wonder what his mates were doing or how good the surf might be. It also concerned him that the mare was spending so much time just wandering about eating grass. She really needed regular exercise.

Then one day, it all fell apart. The neighbour called to see if Bill could help him look for some cows that had wandered off into the bush. Now this was Bill's thing. But before he could accept the offer, he heard his mum announce that he was busy doing his piano practice.

Bill looked out his window and saw their neighbour riding off down the paddock, shaking his head. That did it. In one leap, he was out the window and over the fence. Bill's horse had never been saddled so fast in her life.

It was after dark when Bill rode up to the yard where his dad was milking the cows. His dad was cross because he had had to bring the cows in himself but not as cross as his mum.

There was a big family discussion that night and as a result, the piano lessons were put on hold. In later life, Bill realised how foolish he had been, as he had had the chance to learn a skill that would have proved a great benefit to himself and a lot of other people over the years.

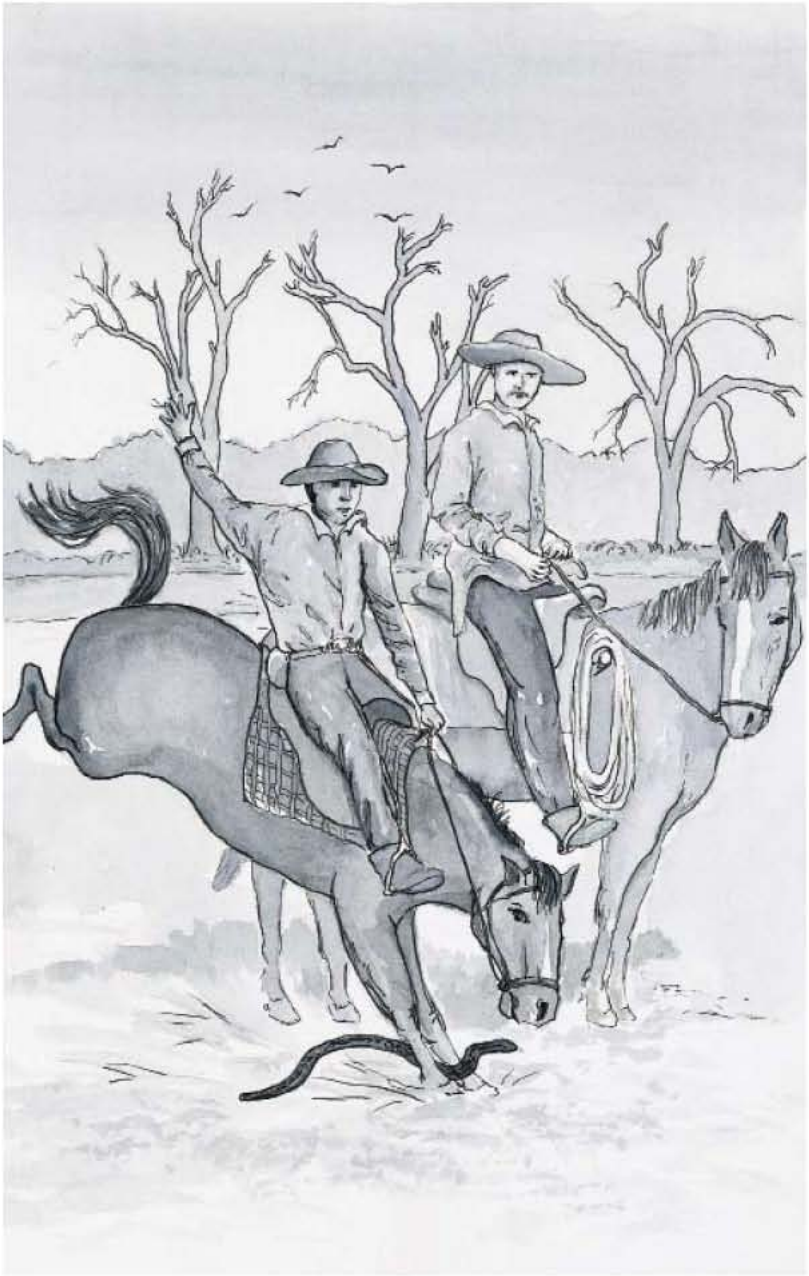
THE SLEEPY STOCKMAN

It was a stifling hot day. There was no breeze and hardly a sound, only the "clip clop" of the horses' hooves on the well-worn trail. The cicadas were the only sounds that disturbed the silence of the surrounding bush. All nature seemed to be struggling to breathe.

Bill and some of his mates had been out all morning, helping a farmer search for stray cattle. They were supposed to be home by lunchtime but had failed to locate the wandering stock. Their water containers were empty and their saddlebags no longer contained any food. It would be fair to say that the riders were in a gloomy state of mind.

"I have a feeling we are close to finding the stock," encouraged the farmer. "Keep a sharp lookout for signs of their presence and listen for any sounds of moving cattle in the bush."

The riders were having a hard time keeping awake, let alone concentrating on the task at hand.



"It's hard to pay attention when you are hungry and thirsty," complained Terry. "Why don't we have a short rest? There are some shady trees up ahead."

"The problem is, the cattle might smell the horses and move further into the scrub," the farmer explained. "We have a better chance of spotting them if we come upon them without them knowing we are around."

On and on they went, strung out in single file, plodding along in the heavy heat. It was not long before they had lost concentration completely as they struggled to stay awake.

Suddenly, the horse in front of Bill jumped in the air as if he had been stung by a wasp. His rider got the shock of his life and struggled to stay in the saddle. Everyone was now wide awake, as the disturbed horse bucked and jumped around.

The cause of the horse's terror quickly became obvious. A large black snake was tangled in his legs. The snake wanted to escape from the horse just as much as the horse wanted the get rid of the snake but the more they struggled, the worse the situation became.

While all the fuss was going on, the rider was clinging to his saddle, terrorised at the thought of being bucked off on top of the angry snake. No-one knew what to do to solve the problem.

"Hang on, Tom," everyone shouted. "Give him a good kick in the ribs, it might make him jump clear of the snake," they advised.

Just then the farmer, who had been up in front, arrived on the scene. He quickly unrolled his stockwhip and, with one swift motion, wrapped it around the snake's body and dragged it free of the horse's legs.

Bill and his mates had never seen such a neat bit of whip action in all their lives. Poor Tom was in a state of shock,

white as a sheet. His horse stood quivering, while Tom was not sure whether to get down or stay out of range of any more snakes.

"Get down, Tom," ordered the farmer. "We must inspect your horse to see if he was bitten. If he was, he will be dead within an hour if we don't tie some rags around his legs."

A close inspection indicated that Tom's horse had been lucky. There didn't appear to be any sign of blood or snake venom.

"Your horse looks OK but he is still in shock," declared the farmer. "You may have to lead him for a while until he recovers."

"I think we have had enough excitement for one day," suggested Bill. "Let's call it off and come back next week."

"Very well," agreed the farmer. "Let's return to the main road and you fellows can head back to town. I really appreciate your help. While we didn't find the cattle, at least we know they aren't in this area. Maybe next time, you will pay more attention. If Tom had been watching, he would have seen that snake on the side of the track and steered his horse away from danger."

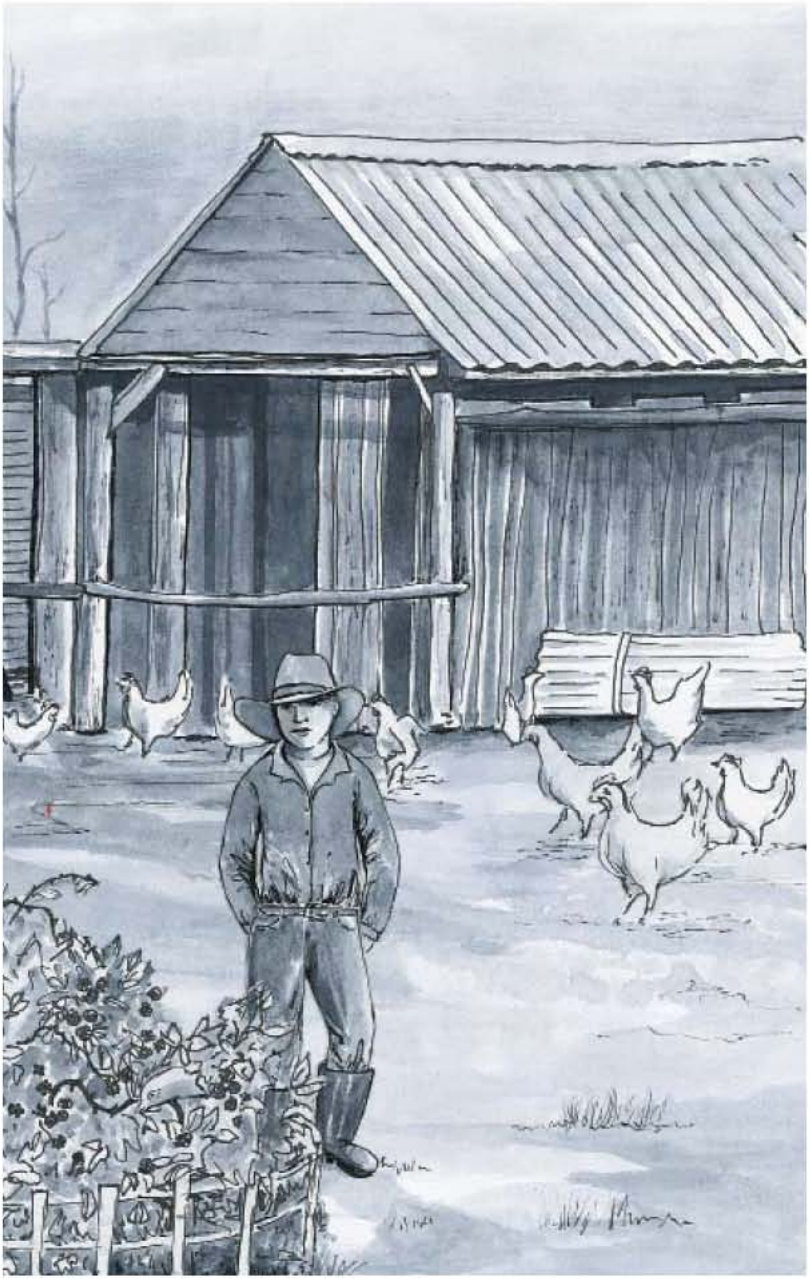
As the riders made their weary way back to town, they agreed that it does pay to concentrate on what you are doing.

THE FREEDOM-LOVING HEN

Bill's dad decided to buy 50 hens. The three-month-old hens were all leghorns. Bill detested this breed, as they always flew over the high wire fence. He was forever catching them outside the yard and clipping their wing feathers. With more than 200 hens to protect, it was a full-time job.

Bill loved the friendly coloured hens. They were all his pets. When any of them got clucky, he would put them in a special box with some straw and a dozen eggs. Every morning, he would let the hens out to eat and drink. Then, when they went back to sitting on their eggs, he would leave them to do their job.

It was always an exciting time when the chickens hatched. Each hen would be allowed outside to enjoy the "free range." There was a special yard for them, with a shed that could be shut each night to prevent foxes or carpet snakes from eating the chickens.



All this activity kept Bill quite busy. He had to provide water for them, care for the brooding hens, collect the eggs, place the eggs in cartons, clean out the egg boxes and keep the food bins full. At least this job meant he did not have to milk the cows.

With so many hens and a handful of roosters, there were always some sick and dying birds. Bill called them his chooks. Some became his pets and would run to him when he called, "Chook, chook, chook." There were always some who tried to escape. The worst culprit was a white leghorn he called "Leggy." She was always looking for a hole in the wire fence. If Bill left the gate open for just a moment, she would be out in a flash, off into the blackberry bushes that grew behind the yards.

This one hen kept Bill on his toes. If she couldn't fly over the fence, she would scratch a hole in an effort to get under the wooden border. He had to make sure the fence was tightly anchored all around the base of the yard. This was important to keep the foxes out and the hens in. But, no matter how hard Bill tried, he could not stop Leggy from getting out.

Bill always knew when Leggy had got out because, at feeding time, she would be running up and down the fence, trying to get in.

"Why aren't you content to stay with your friends?" scolded Bill. "One day you will be sorry." But Leggy took no notice.

Even though Bill kept her wings clipped, Leggy continued to get out one way or another. He knew she was laying her eggs in a secret place but was not prepared to crawl under the blackberry bushes to locate her nest. This meant there was a nice little nest of eggs for some hungry predator.

When Bill complained to his mum about the wayward hen, she came up with some of her wisdom regarding animals

being very much like human beings.

"You will find that people are quite like that naughty hen," declared Bill's mum. "There are always people who will want to do what they are not supposed to, or rebel against rules which are made for their own good. Take the Ten Commandments for example: God gave us these simple rules to make us happy and protect us from trouble—but most people ignore them because they want to go their own selfish ways."

"I guess that is why there is so much trouble in the world," added Bill. "I suppose Leggy will get into trouble sooner or later. It is a pity, as she is a good layer."

Some weeks later, when Bill went up to the yards to feed the hens, he found a little pile of feathers on the grass near the gate. A closer look revealed the sorry sight of a half-chewed Leggy. She had stayed out too late and missed the evening feed time.

"Poor little hen," moaned Bill. "You got caught on the wrong side of the fence. It looks like a fox had you for dinner. I suppose a goanna will eat your store of eggs. What a sad end to your independent ways."

Bill and his dad got busy making sure there were no places where a fox could dig his way under the fence, now that he had a taste for hens.

"While it is sad to lose a hen," mused Bill. "Her sad end may have prevented a slaughter if a fox got into the yard."

"Yes," agreed Bill's dad. "There is a lesson to be learned from every experience."

A BIG SNAKE

Four days of constant, heavy rain had finally come to an end. Now, a fine day gave Bill a chance to get outside. He decided to take the dogs hunting near the big swamp. He had to cross a large paddock, walk along a cattle track through some thick bush, then down a slope to the swamp.

It was a pleasant walk. The birds were singing, the cicadas were competing with one another and the bush was rustling with life. All the hidden creatures were moving about in search of the sun. The dogs were happily exploring every scent and sound as Bill casually walked along, enjoying the beautiful sunny day.

All nature seemed pleased the rain had stopped. Everything had been left clean and sparkling. The creatures of the bush were all out foraging for food, so the dogs were kept busy. They chased a goanna, which quickly ran up a tree. A rabbit nearly got caught but managed to escape into a hollow log. All the noise startled a wallaby, which darted off into a patch of thick scrub with the four dogs in hot pursuit. Bill called them back,

as the chase would have taken them a long way into the bush and he did not want to visit the big swamp on his own.

As a result of the rain, the swamp was filled with water. The frog choir was in strong voice, as were lots of noisy insects. Bill had never heard so many birds singing their special song at the same time and the noise of the cicadas was almost deafening.

Despite the racket, the dogs were quick to respond to the slightest rustle in and around the reeds that lined the edge of the swamp. Within minutes of their arrival, all the creatures knew the dogs had arrived. The water dragons scurried off in all directions, the frogs jumped in and out of the water, and a couple of large lizards raced up the nearest gum trees.

"Come here," Bill called the dogs. He didn't want them to disturb the creatures too much. There was so much going on and Bill wanted to sit on the grass and take it all in. As he sat on the ground, the four dogs nearly knocked him over, trying to lick his face and jump on him. "Sit," he commanded. "Lie down and behave." He insisted they stay quiet but it was hard for the energetic dogs to sit still.

After a pleasant rest, Bill was about to head back to the house when there was a movement in the long grass near the reeds. The dogs were alert in an instant and quickly pounced on a big red-bellied black snake. Bill did not like the dogs to kill any of God's creatures and, while the snake was dangerous, it did have its place in the life of the big swamp.

However, the dogs hated snakes and were anxious to protect Bill from danger. He called them back but this time they did not obey. Bill stood at a safe distance while the fight raged. He was frightened that one or more of the dogs would be bitten, causing a painful death for the victim.

It took about half an hour before the snarling, barking and

biting ended. When Bill carefully inspected the snake, he was amazed at its length. It was the biggest snake he had ever seen. He found a long stick, stood alongside it, and then laid it close to the big snake and decided that it was nearly two metres (seven feet) long.

"Wow!" he said aloud. "That is a whopper. You dogs are lucky none of you got bitten."

Then Bill had a crazy idea, which he shared with the dogs. "How about if I drag the snake back home and lay it across the road?" he said. "I can tie some fishing line to the snakes head and when a car driver gets out to inspect it, I can pull it into the bushes."

The dogs seemed to agree, so Bill took the snake by the tail and dragged it all the way to the main road. The road between Taree and Foster was not very busy, so it was easy for Bill to lay the snake across the road and hide in the bushes before a car came along.

Bill and the four dogs huddled quietly behind the bushes as they waited for a car to come along. It was not long before an old Ford came shuddering around the corner on the dirt road. As soon as the driver saw the snake he stood on the brakes as the car slid and bumped over the snake. He then backed over it and got out to inspect the biggest snake he had ever seen. As he moved close to have a better look, the snake moved, as they usually do for some hours after they have been killed. At this, the driver leapt back into his car and ran over the snake two or three more times before speeding off up the road.

There were two more similar attempts to "kill" the dead snake before Bill and the dogs got tired of fighting the ants and headed for home. Bill knew that at least three drivers would tell their families that evening how they had run over and killed the biggest red-bellied black snake they had ever seen.

When Bill told the story to his parents at tea time, they laughed together. As usual, Bill's mum found a lesson in the experience.

"What happened today goes to show that things are not always what they seem. We need to stop and think carefully before we jump to conclusions. If those drivers had inspected the snake more closely, they would have seen that it was all chewed up and obviously dead."

"The trouble is," replied Bill. "They were so fearful of the snake, they didn't get close enough to see the signs. It was pretty big and scary."

"Not to worry," said Bill's dad. "They will enjoy telling their story and also give their kids something to tell their friends."

It was a thoughtful Bill who went to bed that night. "It is true," he said to himself. "Things are not always what they appear to be."

SARA THE COW

It was raining when Bill set off to collect the cows. He decided to walk rather than get his saddle wet. The dogs were much happier when he walked. It meant they could play games and have more fun.

Bill had to walk a few miles through the bush before the track led out into a large green paddock where the cows grazed. As soon as Bill called the cows, they would stop eating and head for the track that led to the yard. It was not Bill's habit to count them, as they always followed their leader, the old Jersey.

"Come on, come on," called Bill. "Get a move on. There's a storm coming."

The cows seemed to sense the urgency in his voice. They bunched together, heading off into the bush.

The rain was getting quite heavy as they followed the track through the trees. There was the sound of thunder in the distance, so Bill was anxious to get the cows yarded as soon as possible.

By the time Bill had pushed the last cow into the yard, his dad had already started the milking. Bill hurried to get the dry feed into the bins, so the cows would not fidget while being milked. As soon as that job was done Bill, went to feed the hens and collect the eggs.

He was nearly finished, and looking forward to getting inside the house. The storm was getting noisy when he heard his dad call his name.

His dad sounded upset, so he called out, "Do you want me?"

"Yes," responded his dad in a troubled tone. "Where is Sara?"

"I thought she was with the herd," replied Bill.

"Well, she isn't here and she needs to be milked," growled Bill's dad. "You should pay more attention to what you are doing. Now finish your jobs and then go and look for her. That will teach you a lesson you will not forget."

Bill's dad knew how much he hated thunderstorms and was punishing him harshly.

Bill set off in his wet-weather gear, accompanied by his faithful dogs. As he trudged along in the rain he mumbled to himself, "Surely it wouldn't hurt Sara if she missed one milking."

By the time they arrived at the paddock it was getting dark, so Bill decided to work the paddock in a clockwise fashion, shining his torch in every direction as he called Sara's name.

"What could have happened to the stupid cow?" grumbled Bill, as he and the dogs plodded along in the driving rain. He tried to send the dogs off into the dim corners of the paddock but they couldn't understand what was going on.

Every time the lightning flashed Bill had a good look—no Sara. In spite of his raincoat and hat, Bill was getting cold

and wet. The dogs were looking as miserable as could be with their tails down and forlorn looks on their faces, as if to say, "Why are we doing this?"

One big flash, followed by a thunderous roar, was enough to persuade Bill that it was time to head for home. He knew there would be no warm welcome without Sara but he had done enough, stumbling around a soggy paddock in the dark.

In spite of his dad's lecture, Bill enjoyed his mum's hot stew and was glad to be comfortable in a warm house.

The next day, Bill rose early. He saddled up his horse and went out in search of Sara. This time, he did a more thorough search, looking in every corner and behind every bush. He also decided to check the dam in the far corner of the paddock. He received a nasty surprise to find Sara there, stuck in the mud.

The dry weather had caused the water level in the dam to drop. To get to the water, the cows had to struggle through sticky mud. Sara was heavy in calf, so it was much harder for her to get to the water. She must have had a hard time getting back out after her drink and rolled onto her side, where she remained.

By the time Bill found her, it was too late. He was sad and wondered if he could have saved her if he had located her the night before. He felt guilty and wondered how his dad would react.

Bill's dad had to get the neighbour to pull Sara out of the bog with his tractor. Bill didn't want to watch but he had to help, which made things worse. It was a sad loss, because they had raised Sara from a calf. She was like one of the family. She was about to have her third calf, which only made the loss all the worse.

"Well," commented Bill's dad, "that was a sad, hard lesson

for all of us. What a pity we hadn't scooped out some mud while the dam was low. The cows would have reached the water more easily. Maybe we could have saved her if you had found her last night. It is hard to tell. It just shows that we need to be watchful about what we are doing."

Bill couldn't help thinking how much humans and animals depend on each other, and how important it is to pay attention to our friends—even our four-footed ones.

Words

Bondi	one of Australia's most famous beaches in Sydney, New South Wales
bush	a natural area of land covered with trees, a forest
carpet snake	a large, non-venomous Australian python
chooks	domestic fowls, hens, chickens
lamington	a small dessert made by covering a cube of cake with chocolate icing and coconut
mates	close friends
ruckus	a noisy commotion
scrub	a natural area of land covered with low trees or shrubs
show	a fair or exhibition
snitch	to steal
toilet	a restroom, bathroom

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by Lionel Hartley, January 2026